

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

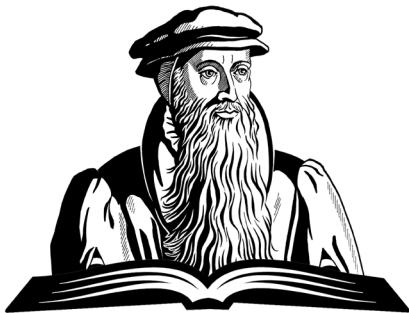
Module 6:

ECCLESIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Lecture 4

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 6 ~ Lecture 4

The Authority of the Church

Dear students, in this module, we want to study about the authority of the church. Does the church of God have authority? Is there any power of the church? If we compare powerful governments of the world, and other business and educational organizations that have great influence, and then consider our local churches, or even our denominational churches, the church may seem weak and ineffective. When we think of the rapid growth of evil in society, we may wonder if the church has power to make any changes at all. In former days, the church had great influence. Think of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, the Church of England in previous centuries, and the days of the Reformation of John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. Also in New England, in the days of the pilgrim fathers, the church had great influence in civil legislation and lawmaking. The power or authority of the church is not man-given, but God-given. In this lecture, we want to study the spiritual authority of the church. You may say that the power of the church is its God-given authority to carry on spiritual warfare, proclaim the gospel, and exercise church discipline.

All authority is rooted in God, who is the author of all that is. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God”—Romans 13, verse 1. The model of the power of the church is definitely not political, sociological, or structural, but one of what the Bible calls “koinonia”—fellowship or communion of loving service in the truth of Christ. Whatever authority the church possesses is always and only for the sake of promoting this koinonia. This fellowship or communion is in Christ and through him, with all the saints.

Christ, as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, has the royal position in the church. Psalm 2, verse 6 says, that the Lord is King of Zion. The living Christ performs a royal work. He rules by his Word and Spirit. He gives his church his authoritative Word. By grace, he also brings sinners, as members of his church, into submission to that Word. *The Heidelberg Catechism* confesses this, in Lord’s Day 48, question 123, about the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come means rule us so by thy Word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee.” Christ also rules with his Word and Spirit in his church through his appointed office-bearers. The church receives its power from Christ through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the first principle of the power of the church is that the power of the church is a heavenly and a spiritual power. Authority and power which are detached from the holiness of Jesus Christ are not Christian authority. When churches seek to enforce power through exploitation, manipulation, or unfair competition, they place themselves above the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so are not real Christian authority and power.

The power of the church is related to the nature of the church. It comes into being by God’s

grace, calling sinners to conversion. Authority can only be exercised in ways which respect this character of the church. Therefore, authority and power always exists in the service of the kingdom of God. This is for his glory, and the salvation of sinners. So the church in itself is not the goal of its authority. It has to be used to promote and facilitate the calling of the church.

The authority of the church is not on the shoulders of a single church leader, preacher, or believer. It belongs to the church as the body of Christ. God delegates his authority to his church through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the living Head of his church. In the next lecture, we will see how this is worked out in practice, through the offices in the church. For now, we stress that the authority of the church is spiritual, and has to be used for God's glory and the extension of God's kingdom.

What are the principal forms of power in the church? Different answers are given to this question. Some may answer that the power of the church is exercised by the pope, the bishops, councils, synods, ministers, elders, theological societies, etc. Or you can point out that the church exercises power by teaching the Bible and the doctrine of the Bible, giving Christian counseling, raising and spending money, erecting church buildings, assigning personnel, and so forth.

How is power acquired in the church? Some churches will say that power is acquired by appointment. Others will say it's by election, ordination, and installation. Still others may answer that power in the church comes spontaneously through a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Some may also point to character or gifts of leadership.

How is power exercised? Some will answer that the power of the church is exercised through the preaching of the gospel, and the administration of the sacraments. Others will stress the work of missions and evangelization. The answer could also be given that the church exercises power through admonition and measures of church discipline.

How is power evaluated? This also depends. Some churches make power accountable to others like a consistory or presbytery, a classis or a synod. Papal power is a power without accountability.

What are the pitfalls of power and or its typical abuses? It is sad to say, but abuse of power also occurs in the church. It will not be difficult to draw up a list of church abuse. Therefore, a system of church government is needed to guarantee checks and balances.

Five principles for the authority of the church can be given:

1. God is the only Lawgiver—James 4:12.
2. One may neither add nor subtract from Scripture—Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18–19.
3. The Lord Jesus rejects human commandments and institutions—Matthew 15:9.
4. It is the calling of ministers to teach all that the Lord has commanded them in his Word—Matthew 28:19–20.
5. Every member must be watchful against becoming a servant of men, not allowing himself to be brought under the dominion of anyone—Galatians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 7:23.

Let's now think of the keys of the kingdom. The expression "the keys of the kingdom" only occurs once in the Bible, in Matthew 16, verse 19: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Some other portions of Scripture are also useful to be mentioned. We read in Revelation 3 verse 7, that the Lord Jesus is the only one who has authority in the church to open and to close: "He that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." This authority is also one of administration, and is used as such upon the command and on behalf of the Lord Jesus. "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder"—Isaiah 22, verse 22.

We use keys to open and close doors. The Lord Jesus uses the example of a key for the authority to preach the gospel of Christ, and thus to open the door of the kingdom of heaven and allow people to enter. Peter used this authority of preaching the gospel at Pentecost. But the other apostles also were given the authority in a primary sense, for they were also the writers of the Gospels of the New Testament. The ministers of the Word have the key in a secondary sense, for they are called by God and ordained by the church to proclaim the gospel. A faithful preacher is called to use the Word key to open and to shut the door of God's kingdom. This does not mean that the preacher of the Word has the right to pass judgment upon each of his hearers, nor tell them personally who shall and who shall not be saved. But in the preaching of God's testimony, he must show for whom the heavenly kingdom is opened and for whom it is shut. Thus the church has power either to include or exclude from the church.

It is beautifully stated in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, question and answer 84: "How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?" Then the answer: "According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed, when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life, and in the life to come." The Holy Spirit gives testimony to this faithful preaching. He shall exclude those whom God's Word excludes, but he will also open the kingdom of heaven to all that are included by the Word.

In addition to the Word key, there is also another key. The Lord Jesus speaks, in Matthew 16, verse 19, in plural, "keys". The second key is the authority to exercise discipline within the church. Jesus completes his speaking of the keys with a statement about "binding" and "loosing". This means placing under church discipline, and releasing from church discipline. See also Matthew 18, verse 17. This binding and loosing also fits in the context of Matthew 16. After promising to build his church—verse 18—Jesus gives the keys to Peter and the other disciples. In Matthew 18, verse 17, we read that this authority was given to the church as a whole. The authority, with respects to church discipline, is not unlimited. It will only be effective against true sin—sin as defined in God's Word, and discovered by God's holy law. The authority to define what's right and wrong belongs to God alone. The church can only declare and teach what God has already commanded in his Word. Therefore the discipline key must be used in accordance with the standards of Scripture.

Let us now also listen to the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, question and answer 85, about this second key: "How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?" And the answer: "According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment." Later in this course, we will go deeper into the purpose and procedures of church discipline. For now, we have seen that the use of both keys belongs to the authority of the church given unto her by Jesus himself.

Let's now think of the relationship between the church and the state. The use of the keys of the kingdom has to do with the authority the church has in her own circle. But how does the authority

of the church relate to the authority of the government of state? Does the church have the right to use physical force, like weapons and armies, to carry out its mission? And on the other hand, does a civil government have the right to rule within the church? What does the Bible say of the relationship between the church and the civil magistrates? Scripture indicates that the church should never carry the sword for its purpose in the new covenant age. This was a dreadful mistake made in the Crusades, when the church sponsored armies to reclaim the land of Israel.

Some examples from Scripture. The Lord Jesus said, when he stood before Pontius Pilate, a Roman ruler—John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” The church has the power of keys, not the power of the sword to exercise law and order. The church is called to fight a spiritual battle with the sword of the Word of God, like the Apostle Paul says, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal”—are not worldly—2 Corinthians 10:4. When the Samaritan village would not receive Jesus, James and John wanted to ask for fire from heaven, but Jesus rebuked them for even making that suggestion, in Luke chapter 9. Jesus also clearly respected the civil government, even the Roman emperor: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”—Matthew 22:21.

God gave the civil government the right of the sword—Roman 13, verses 1–7. The authorities are called to govern according to the two tables of the law. This means that they not only have to protect the weak, take care of the needy, and punish robbers and murderers, but also to protect the true church of God, and even to promote true religion, in serving the Lord and obeying God’s commandments. Civil authorities should be the nursing fathers and the nursing mothers of the church, like in the example of the godly kings of Israel. God holds all societies and cultures responsible for obeying his moral standards, and often in the Old Testament, God’s prophets pronounced judgment not only upon the people of Israel, but also upon immoral pagan societies, even though they did not have his written law—Deuteronomy 9:5; Ezekiel 25–32, Jonah, etc. Even civil governments are sent by God “to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right”—1 Peter 2, verse 14.

The authority relationship between church and state is often explained with the Latin words “in sacris” and “circa sacra”. This means that the magistrates do not have power in sacred things but they may have power with regard to sacred things. In other words, not power in the church, but power about the church. Churches of the Reformation have always explained this as the calling of the government to provide for and promote true religion.

It’s evident that the Reformation speaks of such a state government as like a Christian, making a profession of the true religion. For the advancement and the promotion of true religion can only be done by a Christian government. The ideal of a Christian church and a Christian government under the sole headship of Christ wasn’t even reached in Geneva by Calvin, or in New England by the Puritans. They may have come close to the Biblical principles, but it didn’t last.

These limitations between church and state are different from the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church. In ages past, the church of Rome had sometimes greater authority than the civil government. Also the Church of England has a narrow relationship with the Queen and parliament. Looking to Muslim countries today, and many Hindu and Buddhist countries, you see examples of state-forced religion. It is a great blessing of the Lord to live in a country where freedom of religion is granted. We should continue to pray for all those who experience affliction and persecution in the name of Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is able to stand on its own feet and compete in the

present world in any society and in any culture, even when the freedom to profess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is prohibited, because Jesus is the supreme Head and authority of his church, and he gives his strength in our weakness.

The church has the duty to pray for kings and all that are in authority—1 Timothy 2:1–2, to honour their persons, to pay taxes, and to yield them a conscientious subjection and obedience in all their lawful commands. In short, to follow the example of Christ. The church also has the duty to attempt to bring positive moral influence on government and society. It is right for the church to speak out against developments that are inconsistent with Biblical standards of morality.

How does the church then relate to the world? God's authority is no longer recognized and obeyed, since our fall in Adam—Genesis chapter 3. The devil, the world, and men's sinful flesh are the enemies fighting against God's authority. The devil is a murderer from the beginning, who from the moment the promise of the seed of the woman was given—Genesis 3:15, has with evil hatred opposed it and all those who believe in it. He does all in his power to torment them, and if it were possible, to prevent them from coming to Christ. And if they have come, he strives to draw them away from him, thereby obscuring the glory of the church. Against this, the church puts itself in order of battle, battling these enemies with spiritual weapons, as described in Ephesians 6, verses 11–18.

The world uses physical weapons against the church, inflicts damage to property, scorns and taunts the reputation of the godly, and uses fire and sword against them. Behind all this, stands Satan, God's opponent and the adversary of God's church. The enemies will do everything to draw believers away from the faith and the practice of godliness.

The church seeks the salvation of the world. To this end, the church does not use physical weapons, which as a church she does not even possess. Rather she uses the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, the totality of her confession, a sanctified life, a vigorous protection of the truth, and a steadfast patience to endure everything for Christ's sake. Like Paul says to Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith"—1 Timothy 6:12.

In this spiritual warfare, the church is called to loving service. The church is not to stand above the world, but kneel down to serve in the midst of the miseries of this world—Galatians 6:10. The church is to serve even its enemies—Luke 6:33–35. The church is to love its neighbors with true, self-denying love, by the grace of Christ—Luke 10:29–37. The church is called then to be involved in ministering help to those in need, in the local community, the land, and internationally.

Careful involvement is also needed. While the church is not of the world, the church is still in the world, and to be engaged in the world. The church is part of society, and through involvement in society, it is to seek its good—Matthew 5, verse 13: "Ye are the salt of the earth." The church has a restraining effect on sin in the workplace, in school, society, and government. We have to display the blessedness of belonging to the Lord, the loveliness of God's laws, the wonder of his grace, the richness of his provision, the holiness of his word. The commission of Christ as the King and the Head of the church is also important.

We have considered the authority of the church. Now, as we come to the close of this topic, we need to make the circle round. I mean that we have to close where we began. All the authority the church has comes from Christ, like we read in Matthew 28, verses 18 through 20: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."