

# **Authority in the church and world**

**David Schroeder**



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# Contents

Preface .....	6
Foreword .....	7
1. The source of all authority .....	9
2. Good and evil in civil society .....	15
3. Making a difference .....	20
4. In, but not of, the world .....	28
Afterword .....	30

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This is the sixth in a series of pamphlets produced by the Council on Faith and Life of Mennonite Church Canada. Previous pamphlets in the series can be purchased from the Resource Centre (address above) at the following prices (plus mailing):

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# Preface

**F**or several decades Mennonites have struggled to understand and face up to the complicated issues of authority and power. We have held consultations, preached and published articles and pamphlets on this topic. We have had many experiences that demonstrate how important it is for us to consider the nature of authority and to recognize how power is exercised in our church and in secular society.

Whenever we face difficult ethical and theological issues, questions about power and authority immediately come to the fore. Whenever we modify our structures and established ways of doing things we are forced to define jurisdictions and limitations. Such issues and such changes are what we now face again in the church.

David Schroeder is well qualified to offer us some wisdom on this topic. For decades he has been among us as a Bible scholar, ethicist, pastor and mentor. Perhaps most important, he has demonstrated a very high degree of personal integrity in dealing with issues of power.

The Council on Faith and Life of Mennonite Church Canada is pleased to offer this booklet to congregations for individual and group study. We trust that as we seek God's guidance we will receive new insight and wisdom on questions of authority. May God bless you as you engage these questions.

Dan Nighswander  
General Secretary  
Mennonite Church Canada

# Foreword

Questions of power and authority are commonly raised in our world. Power and authority describe certain aspects of almost all relationships, from the child who must obey her parents to the citizen who is subject to the power and authority of the state. Power and authority are common features of relationships within the church, as well, where the authority of pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers and “regular Christians” is exercised in many ways.

Much of the current discussion about power and authority hinges around its abuse. We can all cite examples of the abuse of power: one country invading another; one person killing or injuring another; parents abusing children; manufacturers degrading the environment; spouses abusing or cheating on each other; companies taking advantage of workers; children torturing animals...the list goes on. Such stories are, unfortunately, also present within the church.

For all that, we cannot state that power and authority are intrinsically bad or evil. While setting limits on their exercise is in many cases useful, this approach can itself turn into a contest between powers and authorities, and it does not address the root of the problem. Rather, we need to question: “What is power? What is authority? For what purpose do they exist? How can they best be used to serve rather than to dominate? How can we, as Christians, recast the current understanding of these terms in the way that God intended? How can we undertake to exercise power and authority in accordance with God’s will, within and outside the church, for the good and proper functioning of human society?”

This pamphlet seeks to answer some of these questions, presenting a Christian understanding of power and authority as they relate to civil society and to the church.

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## The source of all authority

**W**here does human authority come from? All authority rests in God the creator, sustainer, and sovereign Lord of all things. Human authority, therefore, comes from God, who created humans to be personal moral agents. God has given humans the ability—in other words, the power—and the responsibility to choose between good and evil.

**Created by God.** Humans were created in the image of God and given responsibilities under God. God the creator called us to help sustain the created order—to “till and keep” the garden—giving us both the authority and the ability to act as its guardians. We need no further mandate. God also asked humans to see to the continuance of life on earth. We were told to be fruitful and multiply and to replenish the earth (Genesis 1:28).

In the same way, God gave humans the authority and the ability to “create” the world around us by naming it. What we name the world, that is what the world is to us. In our task of naming and filling the world, we were not to do so blindly, without forethought, but rather to speak to the quality of life on earth. God has given humans the authority and the power to address those things that further life on earth and those that threaten it, and to manage the world in the direction of life. Called to be God’s people in the world—God’s representatives—we were

given social possibilities and responsibilities to carry out. To this day, God empowers humans to give shape to the material, cultural and spiritual world.

**Created for God's purpose.** God created all things toward life and wholeness, desiring only the fullness of life for all creation. What God created contributed to this end and was called "good," establishing the moral order of the universe. That which opposed and countered this end was "evil."

Humans, as moral agents, were given the power to make choices for good or for evil—in other words, towards life or towards death. Choices towards good would be blessed with life, but choices of evil would be judged by God. In this way all humans were and are accountable to God. We will be judged according to our deeds.

God honours (accepts) the choices that humans make, whether for good or for evil. God gave us the power (ability) to act *for* or *against* God but wants us to speak *for* God in this world.

Speaking for God can take shape in many different ways: we can speak to matters affecting the environment, to matters of right and wrong and to the shaping of the world. We need no further authority than that which God has granted to all humans in creation. But if we betray God's trust in us, our actions will be judged.

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**In rebellion against God.** From the very beginning, humans chose not to honour God. The first humans rebelled against God's will and used their God-given power and authority against their creator by seeking to be autonomous in their choices and to act on the basis of their own selfish judgements of good and evil. The very power God had given them became a temptation—a temptation to seek power that would enable them to become independent of God (Genesis 3). Humans became a law unto themselves, sinning and rebelling against the creator.

This rejection of the creator brought about sin and death. Human actions no longer led to life and blessing - but to sorrow, conflict and death, leading to separation from

God and from God's purpose of life and wholeness. The judgement of God came to fall on all their evil (Genesis 10:1-10).

Our misuses of the power and authority that have been entrusted to us, lead to the judgement of God, not only in our lifetime, but also in the final judgement. It is visited further on our children and on our children's children, and it affects both us as individuals and human society in general (Ezekiel 18).

## How did God's and human authority play out in the first covenant?

**People of the promise.** Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, God called out a new people through whom to reach the entire world. Abraham and Sarah were given a promise: God would be with them if they would listen to the voice of God. Through their faith and trust in the promise, they, together with their descendants, came to experience the power and grace of God in their lives. They knew God to be faithful; God chose them—gave them the power and the authority—to make this known to the entire world.

The children of God also experienced God's power and grace in their liberation from captivity. They had been slaves in Egypt, powerless to save themselves, but God set them free, restoring their power (ability) to do what was right and good and to be God's representatives on earth. Today, too, God frees people from bondage to sin and gives them the power to be truly human, empowering them to be witnesses to God's saving power in the world.

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were empowered to be God's  
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sinful humanity.

**People of the Law.** The people also experienced the power and authority of the Law of God, the Torah, given to them through Moses as a revelation of those things that would lead to life and those that would lead to death. God invited the people to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

This knowledge gave the people the power to covenant freely with God, to be God's people and to choose to do God's will. Rather than being a burden, a law

imposed by God, the Torah was a blessing, a gracious revelation of the things that made for life in the life of the people. The Torah was a gracious instruction or teaching that would allow the people to meet the responsibilities God had given humans at creation. They were now called and empowered to make the will of God known to all people.

**People led by prophets.** The people also experienced the power and authority of the prophetic word. In a time when Israel trusted not in God but in the institutions that had been given to them for their welfare—the laws of sacrifice, the laws of holiness, worship in the temple—God sent to them the prophets to make known the authority and power of God’s Word. At first the Israelites chose not to hear the prophets because they believed they were already doing the will of God, but when the judgements pronounced by the prophets began to come true, they realised that the prophets spoke for God and that God’s Word was both judgement and life. The words of the prophets led to repentance, faith and life (Amos 7:10-17; 9:9-15).

## **How and why did divine and human authority advance with the second covenant?**

**Through revelation.** Through his life and earthly ministry, Jesus revealed the power and grace of God’s love, truth and justice, calling his followers into the presence and service of God. His followers recognized Jesus as the Messiah who had come to lead the people to fullness of life. Through his life, death and resurrection, they received the power to become people of God, to be salt and light in the world.

**For proclamation and mission.** Jesus sent his followers out into the world and gave them the power and the authority that come from God’s word: the power to act in God’s name, to proclaim and to baptize, to cast out demons, to teach. Thus the church—the body of followers—received from God the power and authority to carry out its mission in the world (Matthew 28:18–20).

The followers of Jesus also experienced the authority and power conferred upon them at Pentecost, when the Spirit of God descended upon those who believed. The spirit manifested itself then and in the days following in the actions of believers as they testified to God’s grace and mercy, as they healed the sick, as they told the truth in love and as they were willing to give their lives for the truth of the gospel.



From that time forward, Jesus' followers were empowered to be God's people and to do God's will in the midst of a sinful humanity.

**For liberation and servanthood.** When God freed the children of Israel from captivity and invited them to bind themselves to the will of God (the Torah), God became known as a loosing and binding God. When Jesus came to free humankind from sin and death and asked the people to follow him and to do his will, he became Saviour—he who frees or looses—and Lord—he who binds. Likewise, Jesus commissioned the church to become a loosing and binding church, giving it the power to loose and to bind in his name. In all this, the church seeks to bring Christ's message of liberation and peace to a world that is in bondage.

## **From where do individual Christians obtain their authority?**

**Members of the body.** As a living organism, the church assigns different functions to different parts of the body (Romans 12:4–8). Some functions are assigned in recognition of the gifts of the Spirit to various members; others result from an effort to assign persons to specific tasks that need to be done in the work of the church.

The persons assigned to specific tasks or offices are given the authority and the power to carry out those tasks on behalf of the congregation. Such persons are at all times responsible to the congregation or church. The powers granted are not a licence to exercise unlimited or unauthorized power over other members of the church. Peter admonished the bishops not to lord it over the church or to use that office for themselves, but to set an example of service to the members of the church (1 Peter 5:1f).

**Endless possibilities.** Paul and the early church appreciated the fact that the community of faith requires many services. They recognized that the Spirit had given gifts to the church (1 Corinthians 12:27–31; Ephesians 4:7–16). Paul's lists—which include apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, healers, administrators and various other givers of assistance—make it clear that not all the gifts for all time have been named. Other gifts will be named by the church from time to time in answer to particular needs.

## **What about power and authority in the world at large?**

**In a state of self-deception.** Throughout the world, the mass of humanity that does not know God in Christ, believes itself to be autonomous, self-reliant and self-sufficient. In this it is deceiving itself: despite its belief, it remains under the power and authority of God. It can live in this state of self-deception because God does not force anyone to acknowledge God or to be obedient to God's will.

The moral order that God has ordained remains in effect and affects everyone alike, whether or not they acknowledge the existence of God. That which is in harmony with the character and purpose of God will be rewarded and will lead to life, but that which is against the character and purpose of God will be judged, both now and in the time to come, and will lead to death.

**Subject to the principalities and powers.** Because God does not compel humans to do the will of God, humans have become bold in their rebellion. We have not only acted at cross-purposes with the character and will of God, but we have caused structures of evil to come into existence, structures that have power over people and take people into captivity to sin. Paul speaks of these powers in terms of the “principalities and powers of darkness” and the “principalities and powers of this age” (Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 6:12; Col. 1:13,16; 2:10, 15).

Whenever and wherever Christians do not yield to these powers, they are exposed as pseudo-powers, and in this recognition that they can be overcome, people are freed to begin to seek redemption and release from them.

**Christ shows the way.** Though the powers of evil reign in the world today, Christians know that the powers aligned against God have already been conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even in the face of death on the cross, Jesus did not yield to these powers but committed himself to do the will of God—and God raised him from death, from the worst the powers of evil could do. This is the sign that Christ is victorious over sin and death, that he has overcome the world and that we can claim the victory in and through him.



## Good and evil in civil society

**F**rom where do civil structures obtain their authority? As noted earlier, humans were created as moral agents and social beings. God entrusted humans with authority and power, which enables us to make real choices or to “exercise dominion” (authority). This belongs to the core of what it means to be human. We have been given the power to structure life on earth on the basis of our beliefs and character: to choose how to relate to God, to each other and to the world about us; how to order life with respect to food, shelter, clothing and survival in this world; how to structure life together; how to avoid or overcome human conflicts and how to maintain order in society.

In this sense, authority and power are of God and are good. Life would be impossible if humans never exercised any authority or power—we would live in a world of chaos and anarchy. It is out of this exercise of authority and power that what Paul calls the “powers”—the rulers or civil authorities—originate. Paul indicates that “dominions, rulers and powers” were created in and through Christ (Col.1:16).

Human choices or actions result either directly or indirectly in the creation of structures of order. If we as humans consistently behave in a certain way, we end up creating a pattern, order or structure, even if we are not aware of the effects of our actions (the sidewalk is often placed where the people have already been walking). At other times, we

deliberately create organizations, institutions and structures to accomplish specific goals (schools, credit unions, MCC). Every society contains a multitude of such organizations, institutions and structures, most of which have been created to serve the common good. In this sense the structures and institutions of society are given of God for our welfare.

## Why are civil structures not always good?

Human sin, or the Fall, has extended its reach into all human actions and endeavours, permeating all human relationships and all ordering of society. Because of our sinfulness, the organizations, institutions and structures of society have come to serve a mixture of good and evil ends. Although God-given and intended for our welfare, once structures of order are in place they begin to become autonomous, exercising over people an authority and a power of their own, which grows more and more difficult to change or overrule the longer and the more entrenched they become.

Over time most structures become oppressive, focused on domination, demanding absolute submission. The welfare of the people is no longer their concern; rather, their focus is maintaining their power. All levels of the structures will extend sanctions against those who do not remain submissive, with the ultimate sanction being violence against those who resist. That is why Paul speaks of them as “dominions, principalities and powers.” Such structures now have power over all persons in society, whether for good or for evil.

Once a system or structure is devoted to evil more than to good, it becomes an instrument of systemic evil. People then contribute towards evil simply by living within those structures, seldom able to find an easy way to extricate themselves. This situation is reflected in Revelation 13, where the state itself became an instrument of evil and invited people to worship the Beast. All the people thus participated in the evil of that society, unless they deliberately said “no,” refused to worship the Beast and suffered martyrdom.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost—and the “powers” are included among the lost, in equal need of redemption.

The civil structures (“powers”) will make use of everyone and everything—all persons, organizations and structures—to maintain and ensure their continuation. Many persons whose power rests in these structures and who have vested interests in the system will co-operate with the “powers” against those who would challenge them.

The most insidious powers of darkness are those that are sanctioned by religious beliefs. Because the “powers” (civil structures) are of God, it is possible to make people believe that even the evil permitted by specific structures is God-willed. This is achieved by creating myths, such as the myth of redemptive violence, that undergird the structures of evil. The myth of the redemptive power of violence—the most basic and most frequently used—leads people to believe that violence is necessary for the preservation of life and for the welfare of the people, and that a salvation of sorts can be found through the use of violent means to achieve good ends. Most people believe this myth.

This participation in violence can be found in both Judaism and Christianity. It began with husbands subjugating their wives (Genesis 3:16) and continued with the Israelites’ belief that they had to go to war to protect the land. In the Gospels we notice that even the disciples assumed that the Messiah would be a powerful king and would subdue the enemy with physical might (Mark 8:27-30). But it did not happen that way.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), Jesus made the most powerful statement ever against the myth of redemptive violence. Walter Wink indicates that it was Jesus who first revealed to the world the “dominion-free order of non-violent love”:

In his beatitudes, in his extraordinary concern for the outcasts and marginalized, in his wholly unconventional treatment of women (speaking to them in public, touching them, eating with them, even with harlots, above all, teaching them), in the seriousness with which he took children, in the rejection of the dogma that high-ranking men are the favourites of God, in his subversive proclamation of a new order in which domination would give way to compassion and communion, Jesus overturned the most rigidly held mores of his time. (*Engaging the Powers*, p.45)

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost—and the “powers” are included among the lost, in equal need of redemption.

## How can civil structures be redeemed?

Institutions and structures of order are not necessarily evil, but many of them have become dysfunctional or satanic through human sin. These are in need of redemption.

The Gospel message is that Christ has overcome the world. Jesus resisted the powers of darkness in all that he said and did. True to form, they responded to his challenge by using both the religious and political representatives of his day to put him to death as an enemy of the state and of the religious institutions.

It seemed as if the forces of darkness had won the day. Those who were used to kill Jesus no doubt thought that their act of violence had saved the people from untold harm. But the story does not end that way!

God raised Jesus from the dead. God honoured the life and work of Jesus and declared him victor over sin and death through the resurrection. What is striking is that that victory was won not through violence but through love, truth, justice and self-sacrifice.

Jesus, in his own life, gave us an example of how we are to challenge the powers of darkness. We are to be fully Christian in our lives and not yield to that which is evil in the demands of the “powers.” It is clear that we cannot do so in our own strength—we need to be strengthened by the hand and Spirit of God, born in Jesus to a new life that shares in his love, truth and justice. Paul says:

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:15)

Jesus gives us power through the Spirit to say “no” to the powers of evil. Christians have believed the myth of redemptive violence so often that they have bowed to the domination systems of this world. However, in Christ it is possible to resist evil without resorting to violence. Jesus calls us to be Christ-like in character and to manifest the power of love, truth and justice in the world.

Jesus gives power to the church—the corporate community of believers—to resist the powers of darkness. The Spirit of Christ enables the church to discern what is of God and what is not of God, empowering it to engage the powers of darkness on very specific issues of wrong and to point to that which will be life to the people. The Spirit of God helps the community of faith to encourage each other to love and to good works. In this way, Christians, both individually and as a body of believers, address and challenge the powers of evil.

It is not enough, however, merely to challenge the structures of evil: God intends that they be redeemed. We cannot live without the “powers,” but they should lead to life rather than to death. Paul indicates that the whole creation waits for the revealing of the children of God and for redemption (Romans 8:19–23). This implies that salvation must be viewed in broader terms than has traditionally been the case.

Salvation is not only the salvation of the individual, nor is it simply changing the social environment. Human suffering is caused by structures of evil, but it is human evil that gives rise to and maintains these structures. The individual is not separate from social relationships, and these social relationships are always framed within some structure of power. Thus salvation must affect all three of these—the person, the people and the structures.



## Making a difference: Becoming new creations

**H**ow shall we then live? Christ has overcome the principalities and powers of darkness. In the Exodus, God acted to free a people from bondage. God has now acted in Christ to overcome the powers of evil and to set people free from bondage to them.

**Becoming new creations.** Those who are in Christ have become new creations, new beings (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have been born again to a new and living hope (1 Peter 1:3) and have committed ourselves to Christ as Lord. We have experienced the forgiveness of our sins and the renewing of our minds, having been set free from bondage to sin and death. We have received the Holy Spirit and experience the work of the Spirit in our lives toward holiness and sanctification.

Christians engage the powers of darkness in and through Christ. Paul spoke repeatedly about being in Christ. When we receive the Spirit of Christ we overcome more and more the “works of the flesh”—all those things that are opposed to the spirit of Christ, such as immorality, idolatry, jealousy, strife, and so on (Galatians 5:19). We engage the powers through our Christ-like behaviour and life, “putting off” the things that are “earthly”: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness and idolatry (Colossians 3:5). The more we follow Christ in life, the more we will manifest the fruit of the Spirit of God—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22–24)—becoming like those who are called blessed in the Beatitudes.



**Freed from the powers.** Our commitment to Christ frees us from enslavement to the principalities and powers of darkness. With the help of the Spirit of Christ, we can be freed from the principalities of our time: from selfishness (in whatever way it manifests itself), individualism (in which we have no regard for others), materialism (in which we live for things, not for what is of God), militarism and security (in which we trust more in power and might than in God), nationalism (in which we place the state about all else), human rights (in which we place human life above all else), abuse (in which we use people to our own selfish ends), and from all forms of idolatry (in which we worship other things than God). This is what it means to become more and more Christ-like in character.

Christians are to let the fact that we belong to Christ show through in all our stations in life. Each person has many different stations or relationships that imply a duty to someone else: son or daughter, father or mother, husband or wife, farmer, employee, citizen, landlord, driver of a car, and so on.

Through the way in which we live out our stations, we are to work to overcome the injustices embodied in the institutions and structures of our society: in the economic system, which gives power to the rich but nothing to the poor; in the legal system, in which we must declare war against another person in order to receive justice; in the patriarchal systems of the family and of society, with their tendency toward abuse; and in the power of corporations, which take economic and political systems captive to the bottom line.

### **What does this mean for family relationships?**

Over the ages, human choices and actions have led to the establishment of various cultures and societies. Genesis 4:17–22 tells us that Enoch built a city, Lamech took two wives, Jabel was the father of those who lived in tents and had cattle, Jubel invented musical instruments and Zillah forged instruments of iron. Clearly, humans have called into being the various structures of society.

Being able to  
trace one's  
lineage back to  
Abraham was no  
longer sufficient  
to belong to the  
people of God.  
Membership in  
the people of  
God was open to  
all who chose to  
do God's will.

**Questioning patriarchy.** By the time of Abraham and Sarah, the patriarchal pattern of the family and society was firmly entrenched. Within that society, Abraham and Sarah were called to know God and to be God’s people. As they responded to the revelation of God, they were freed more and more from some of the evils of that society and culture; they rejected war as a way of becoming a wealthy and powerful people; they refused to offer human sacrifices; and they sought to live in peace with their neighbours. But some of these changes were gradual, and some things didn’t change. In some areas of life, such as marital relationships, they still lived as the surrounding people did—exercising polygamy—even though this would be called into question later.

It was easy for Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to go along with the dominant culture, just as it is easy for us today to “go with the flow.” It was and is more difficult—but not impossible—to reject aspects of the culture and to take the consequences for doing so. Through the grace of God, Abraham and Sarah were able to reject war, violence, and human sacrifice, and to be in truth God’s people. Their example shows us that it was and is possible to live by a different standard even in a patriarchal society.

In Abraham and Sarah’s day, the patriarchal structures of society allowed those in power to take advantage of others for their own selfish ends, resulting in the oppression and enslavement of various groups of people—the poor, the powerless and the destitute. We can gain a good overview of the injustices common in that society by examining the Law of Moses, which spends much time in defence of those who were abused or vulnerable—the poor, widows and orphans, rejected wives, slaves (both Hebrew and non-Hebrew), strangers and criminals.

With the coming of Jesus, the patriarchal social and family structures themselves were called into question. From that time forward, being able to trace one’s blood lineage back to Abraham was no longer sufficient to belong to the people of God. Rather, membership in the people of God was open to all who chose to do God’s will (Mark 3:31). Women could follow Jesus and become his disciples, women could be considered witnesses, they could sit at the feet of the teacher the

We have empowered  
 leaders to rule rather  
 than to lead, to  
 manipulate people  
 rather than to win  
 them, to make  
 decisions for people  
 rather than to help  
 them bind themselves  
 to that which is of  
 God.

same as the men (Luke 10:38–42) and they were regarded as morally responsible persons. Slaves were now also accorded the same treatment.

As it developed, the church continued what Jesus had begun. Women received the outpouring of the Spirit along with the men. They were witnesses of the gospel message and accepted responsibilities in the church, serving as deacons and as leaders of house churches. Some senior widows even served in a paid ministry in the church (1 Timothy 5:9). Paul, one of the church’s earliest leaders, indicated that in Christ there is no difference between men and women (Galatians 3:28). Lydia had a church in her house (Acts 16:14: a “house” refers to the extended family, together with servants and slaves), as did Priscilla and Aquilla in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19).

**Marital relationships.** The relationship between husbands and wives had also changed. Nothing shows this more clearly than the “household rules” in Ephesians 5:21–33: husbands and wives were asked to be subject *to one another*. The wife was told to be subject to her husband, but she was to do so “as to the Lord”—that is, her loyalty to Christ was the primary loyalty.

The word to the husbands was quite different. Husbands would not have understood if they had simply been told to be subject to their wives. How could they have interpreted this in that society? The Greek philosopher Plutarch, who lived during the time of the early church, encouraged husbands to be subject to their husbands but then encouraged husbands, not to be subject to their wives, but to *rule* them in such a way that they would not become rebellious. Husbands were quite accustomed to ruling their wives.

The decisions we make are to be binding for ourselves personally, and for us as a community under the Lordship of Christ.

Over against this, Paul’s suggestion that husbands be subject to their wives was indeed a new way of thinking. Furthermore, Paul indicates that husbands are to *love* their wives with an agape, or selfless, love—they are to love their wives the way Christ loved the church; they are, in fact, to sacrifice themselves for their wives. If they do this they will treat their wives with respect and as persons in their own right. There will truly be mutuality in the marriage.

**Parents and children.** Husband and wife relationships were not the only family relationships that had changed in Christ.

The same could be said of parent–child relationships. Formerly, in the Old Covenant, children were to be obedient to their parents. This was interpreted, rightly or wrongly, to mean absolute obedience. The son was to be obedient to his father until the father died; the daughter was obedient to her father until betrothal, at which time she came under the power of her husband and his family. Disobedience could be punished by death.

Once again, with the coming of Jesus, this changed. The “household rules” in Colossians 3:18–4:1 indicate that children are to be obedient to their parents “in the Lord”—in other words, obedience to their parents is not absolute, but is to be informed by their obedience to Christ. The command to obedience is given in relation to the Lordship of Christ over their lives. Children are to be subject to their parents, but their obedience is not to violate their relationship to Christ.

## **What can the community of believers do?**

**Calling societal structures to account.** As Christians, we are called to be the Body of Christ in the world. We have received the great commission to make disciples of all nations and to teach them, as well as the commission to be a loosing and binding fellowship. The decisions we make are to be binding not only for ourselves personally but also for us, as a community under the Lordship of Christ. It is one thing to try to be Christian as individuals, it is quite another thing to be the Body of Christ as a corporate community—the church.

The church is, first of all, a worshipping community. We show our devotion to God through worship, honouring God as creator, sustainer and redeemer. We bring praise, honour and glory to God in our songs, prayers and our commitment to Christ the Lord. In our worship we become and show ourselves to be the people of God.

The church is also a loosing and binding community. Christ frees us as individuals to join with others and become members of the Body of Christ. As such, we as individuals share in the loosing and binding functions of the community. We have all lived in bondage to sin and are even now tempted by many things. Through the forgiveness of Christ we are set free to be God’s people.

Christians seek to help each other to be freed from selfishness, from the works of the flesh, and from all the “isms” of this world that lead to idolatry (individualism, nationalism, materialism, consumerism, obsession with security, etc.). We carry mutual responsibility, are accountable to one another in Christ, and seek to encourage each other. Furthermore, we hold out to others the freedom we have received in Christ and in the Body of Christ.

As members of the church, we act together to bind ourselves to that which is in harmony with the character, will and purposes of God for the world. In the church, Christians seek to become in truth disciples of Christ. We accept responsibility for each other, seek to strengthen each other and willingly carry each other’s burdens. We seek to know and to do the will of God, we accept our responsibility to discipline each other in the love of Christ, and we seek to discern what is of God in the structures of society and in the actions of people in society—to discern what constitutes being the church of God in the world.

One of the tasks of the church is to name, avoid, and overcome that which leads to evil in the structures of society—to bind evil not merely on a personal or church level, but in society at large. In the church we learn to be subject to the state without giving it blind obedience. In and through Christ, Christians learn not to abuse the powers granted to us in a patriarchal society and to seek to overcome all forms of racism and discrimination against the poor and the marginalized. Through the Spirit’s enabling power, Christians name the injustices of society and seek to point people toward justice for all.

As members of the church, we bind ourselves to justice. We know the righteousness and justice of God and seek it for all people. We commit ourselves to name what is just and what is unjust, what is right and what is wrong, and we are willing to stand up for what is right and just and to challenge the wrong and unjust. We become advocates for those unjustly treated—the poor, the powerless and the marginalized.

We base our search for justice in our knowledge of God’s love in Christ. We bind ourselves to that love, which has been planted in our hearts through the Spirit of God and which is to be manifested in all our relations to others. We seek as a church to love as Christ loved—not only those of like faith

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but even the enemy—to act in love to both the accepted and the outcasts, the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor; and to accept fully the vulnerability of agape love.

As members of the Body of Christ, filled with the love of God, we commit ourselves to finding more just ways of relating to our neighbour. This involves creating ways of relating that are more just and egalitarian and that relate more to people as persons. The patriarchal structures in family and society then become more egalitarian and personally fulfilling.

Christians bring a new spirit into the workplace and into the structures of business where the powers of the owners, employers and managers are not used against the working poor. We bring a new spirit to what it means to work for people in the larger community, by showing our love through our works to all people.

**Engaging in servant leadership.** Christians have, by and large, taken our models of leadership from the world around us. In fact, we have understood the Scriptures that way, reading into the metaphor of “God as king” the qualities of human kings. We have seen God as a powerful, autocratic, vindictive being. We have made God over into our human image.

When we speak about God, we of necessity speak in human metaphors. We cannot do otherwise. But we should not read our human foibles and weaknesses into God. Although sovereign lord of the universe, God has chosen not to act the way human kings do and lord it over people—which would be out of character. We, then, rather than making God over into our human image, should seek to become God-like and Christ-like in character.

It is a sad commentary on the church that we have adopted the world’s style of leadership in our midst. We have tried hard to adopt the patterns of authority deemed successful in business and public administration. We have empowered leaders to rule rather than to lead, to manipulate people rather than to win them, to make decisions for people rather than to help them bind themselves to that which is of God.

What is needed instead is servant leadership—the kind we see manifested in Christ, who came not to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:35–45).

In the church, authority and power rest not primarily with the leader or officers but with the body of fellowship. The leaders serve under the church and are in fact servants of the church. They need to be part of the loosing and binding function of the church—they need to be set free to serve and they need to bind themselves to serve the church under Christ.

God did not force the people to do God's will; neither should we or our leaders. God set before the people knowledge of right and wrong and then invited the people to choose that which would be life. In the same way, leaders do not have absolute power over people but delegated power to appeal to people in the name of the church and the gospel.



## In, but not of, the world

**T**he church is not mandated to live for itself; rather, it is to proclaim the Gospel, the revelation of God to humankind, to the whole world. This mandate has existed since the time of Abraham and continues to exist today. It has not changed even though the people of God have often failed to carry out this commission. It is inconceivable that the church should be silent in the light of so great a salvation.

We live under the power and authority of God. But we live this life under God in a world that is under the principalities and powers of darkness. How then are we to live? How are we to be obedient to Christ our Lord when we are still under the powers of evil and we are told to be “subject” to these powers? In such cases, it is important to understand that Christians are in the world but not of the world.

Paul admonishes us to be subject to the governing powers of the land. Such governments have the duty to keep order and to serve the common good. Other structures, as well, have taken shape through human actions over many years and now set the context for us in every area of life—politically, legally, economically, in education, in assumptions of the public good and in every field of endeavour. Christians are to recognise the God-given function of our governing powers and to be subject to them, but at the same time our supreme allegiance belongs to Christ. As



Christians, we are called to live in the world and to make decisions of how to do so on the basis of our allegiance to Christ.

We are mandated to proclaim the Gospel, and one of the ways we do so is by naming the world in accordance with our knowledge of God—naming evil for evil and good for good. Although God-given, many of the governing powers and other structures have gained an autonomy and power of their own and cannot be ignored. Thus, at times it may be necessary for Christians to break with the structures of society, in proclamation and in action. When the church names the truth of God, it becomes a power in the lives of people, warning people of evil and giving them the opportunity to flee, whether they accept or reject that word.

If a Christian were to be asked or compelled to do something contrary to the will of God, he or she would obey God rather than the governing powers and take the consequences for doing so. In such cases we may suffer loss, be persecuted or at times even executed for our failure to honour the accepted order, but this is our witness to the fallenness of society and the powers.

When we as Christians manifest in our lives that we have overcome the principalities and powers of darkness, it gives hope to those who are in bondage to such powers. When we manifest the love of God to friend and foe alike, it is a powerful invitation to come to know God in Christ Jesus. To do what is right is a witness to all that is false or evil: the Christian's obedience to Christ is thus lived out in the world.

When Christians do what is right and just and loving in society, new structures are often created, structures that are more just and egalitarian—such as hospitals, universities, and welfare organizations, all of which began as institutions created by the church. Indeed, this may be one of the callings of the church: to create structures of justice in a fallen society. It is certainly one of the ways in which God sustains creation and brings order out of chaos.

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# Afterword

Power and authority, then, are intrinsic to the Christian life. All power and authority, whether within or outside the church, come from God, and they are given to enable us to make choices for life and to order our world in the direction of life. Because of our fallenness, authority, power, and the structures they imbue have come to be corrupted by misuse and abuse.

We as Christians are called to exercise power and authority in the way that God intended: not to dominate, but to serve; not to engage in violence, but to model peace; not to live for selfish ends, but for the good of all. Love and justice are our overarching concerns: our exercise of power and authority, both within the church and in society at large, should be to these ends.

Because we, too, are fallen, we often go astray and follow worldly models of power and authority, or engage in the violence and selfishness that is contrary to God's will. But through the love of Christ and the power and authority of his Spirit, we are empowered to live in a more Christ-like fashion, seeking to use our authority to serve by calling others to be freed from the bondage of sin and to bind themselves to the will of God—seeking a more excellent way.

## About the author

David Schroeder was born in Southern Manitoba, worked as a conscientious objector during WWII, and later became a Mennonite pastor in Winnipeg. After contracting polio in 1953 he decided to pursue further education. He holds a PhD in New Testament from the University of Hamburg (1959). Schroeder then began teaching in Winnipeg at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, where he has taught for over 30 years. He is currently professor emeritus of New Testament.

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### **From the introduction**

Power and authority describe aspects of almost all relationships, from the child who must obey her parents to the citizen who is subject to the power and authority of the state.

Much of the current discussion about power and authority hinges around its abuse. We can all cite examples of the abuse of power: one country invading another, one person killing or injuring another, parents abusing children, the list goes on. Such stories are, unfortunately, also present within the church.

For all that, we cannot state that power and authority are intrinsically bad or evil. How can we undertake to exercise power and authority in accordance with God's will, within and outside the church, for the good and proper functioning of human society?

This pamphlet seeks to answer some of these questions, presenting a Christian understanding of power and authority as they relate to civil society and to the church.—*David Schroeder*

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*Authority in the church and world* **27**