

# The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proved from Scripture

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It is necessary, first of all, to know where and what a Christian congregation is, so that men may not engage in purely human affairs under cover of the name of a Christian congregation, as has always been the custom of non-Christians. Now the certain mark of the Christian congregation is the preaching of the Gospel in its purity. For as one can tell by the army standard, as by a sure sign, what leader and what army have taken the field, so one may surely know by the Gospel where Christ and His army are stationed. Of this we have God's sure promise in Isaiah 55:10. "My word," He says, "that goeth forth out of my mouth, shall not return unto me void; but as the rain cometh down from heaven and watereth the earth, so shall my word accomplish all things whereto I send it." Hence we are certain that where the Gospel is preached, there must be Christians, no matter how few in number or how sinful and frail they be; just as where the Gospel is not preached and the doctrines of men hold sway, there can be no Christians but only heathens, no matter how great their numbers or how saintly and good their lives.

From this it follows undeniably that bishops, foundations, monastic houses, and all that crew have long since ceased to be either Christians or a Christian congregation, though they have flaunted this name as their exclusive possession. For whoever knows what the Gospel is can see, hear and understand that they are based, to this very day, upon their human teachings and have driven, and are still driving, the Gospel far from them. Whatever such folk do and say must be regarded, therefore, as heathen and secular.

Secondly, in this matter of judging teachings and of appointing and dismissing teachers or pastors, not the least attention is to be paid to any human decree, law, precedent, usage or custom, whether it be decreed by pope or emperor, by princes or bishops, whether it have been observed by half the world or by all the world, whether it be in existence for one year or for a thousand years. The soul of man is eternal and above everything that is temporal; therefore it must be ruled and equipped with an eternal word alone. It is most absurd to rule conscience, in God's stead, by means of human law and long established custom. We must be guided, therefore, in this matter by the Scriptures and the Word of God. For the Word of God and the teaching of man cannot but dash when the latter undertakes to rule the soul. Of this we desire to give a plain instance in the question before us.

The word and teaching of man have decreed and prescribed that the judging of doctrine be left altogether to bishops, theologians, and councils. Whatever these have decided, all the world is bound to regard as law and as articles of faith. This is abundantly proved by their daily harping on the pope's canon law. One hears scarcely anything else from them but the boast that they have the

power and the right to judge what is Christian and what is heretical; the plain Christian must await their decision and abide by it. This claim of theirs, with which they have intimidated the whole world, and which is their chief stronghold and defense, lo, how shamelessly and how senselessly it rages against the law and Word of God!

For Christ decrees the very opposite. He takes from the bishops, theologians and councils both the right and the power to judge doctrine, and confers them upon all men, and upon all Christians in particular. He does this when He says in John 10:27, "My sheep hear my voice"; and, "My sheep do not follow a stranger, but flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers. As many as have come are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not hear them." Here you see plainly who has the right to judge teaching. Bishops, pope, theologians, and anyone else have the power to teach; but the sheep are to judge whether what they teach is the voice of Christ or the voice of strangers. What reply can be made to this by the windbags who bluster and shout, "Councils! councils! Ah, we must listen to the theologians, the bishops, the great majority; we must look to ancient usage and custom." What! God's Word yield to your ancient usage, your custom, your bishops? Never! We therefore let bishops and councils decide and decree what they please; but when we have God's Word on our side, it shall be for us, and not for them, to say whether it is right or wrong, and they shall yield to us and obey our word.

Here you see plainly enough, I fancy, how much trust is to be placed in those persons who deal with souls by means of the word of men. Who does not see that all bishops, foundations, monastic houses, universities, with all that are therein, rage against this clear word of Christ by shamelessly taking from the sheep the judgment of doctrine and appropriating it to themselves by their own impudent decree? Hence they are certainly to be regarded as murderers, thieves, wolves and apostate Christians, who are here openly convicted not only of denying the Word of God, but of setting up and carrying out decrees in opposition to this Word. Thus it behooved antichrist and his kingdom to do according to Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

Again, Christ says in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Observe that He here assigns the judgment not to the prophets and teachers, but to the pupils, or the sheep. For how could one beware of false prophets unless one examined, judged and gave a decision on their teaching? Indeed, there can be no false prophets among the hearers, but among the teachers alone. All teachers should and must, therefore, be subject with their teaching to the judgment of the hearers.

Our third passage is from St. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "Test all things; hold fast that which is good." Note that Paul would have no doctrine or decree to be observed unless it be tested and found good by the congregation that hears it. For this testing certainly does not pertain to the teachers; they must first declare that which is to be tested. Thus, in this passage also, the judgment is taken from the teachers and committed to the pupils among Christians; hence there is a vast difference between Christians and the world. In the world the ruler commands what he pleases, and his subjects accept it; but "among you," says Christ, "it shall not be so." Among Christians everyone is the other's judge and, on the other hand, also subject to the other. The spiritual tyrants, however, have turned Christendom into a temporal power.

Our fourth passage is again a saying of Christ's, in Matthew 24:4, "Take heed that no man deceive you; for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ, and shall deceive many." But what need is there of adducing further passages? All the warnings of St. Paul in Romans 16:13, 1 Corinthians

10:14, Galatians 3:4, 4 and 5, Colossians 2:8, and everywhere else, as well as the sayings of all the prophets in which they teach that doctrines of men are to be rejected, these altogether deprive the teachers of the right and power to judge any teaching, and assign this right and power to the hearers with urgent commands and on pain of losing their souls. So that the hearers not only have the power and the right to judge all preaching, but are obliged to judge it under penalty of forfeiting the favor of Divine Majesty. Thus we see in how unchristian a manner the despots dealt with us when they deprived us of this right and appropriated it to themselves. For this thing alone they have richly deserved to be cast out of the Christian Church and driven forth as wolves, thieves and murderers, whose rule and teaching are contrary to God's Word and will.

We conclude, then, that where there is a Christian congregation which has the Gospel, it not only has the right and the power, but is in duty bound, according to the obedience it pledged to Christ in Baptism, and under pain of forfeiting its salvation, to shun, to flee, to put down, to withdraw from, the authority which our bishops, abbots, monastic houses, foundations, and the like exercise today; since it is plainly to be seen that their teaching and rule are opposed to God and His Word. Thus our first point is established certainly and firmly enough, and we should depend upon it that to put down or to shun such bishops, abbots, monasteries, and the like rule, is a divine right and necessary for the salvation of souls.

A Christian congregation, however, should not and cannot be without the Word of God. It follows therefore logically enough from the foregoing, that it must have teachers and preachers to administer this Word. And since in these last accursed times the bishops and false spiritual rulers neither are nor have any intention of being such teachers, and are moreover unwilling to give us or to suffer us to have such teachers; and since we ought not to tempt God to send down anew preachers from heaven: therefore we must do as the Scriptures say, and call and appoint from among ourselves men who are found fit for this work, and whom God has enlightened with understanding and endowed with the requisite gifts.

For no one can deny that every Christian has God's Word and is taught of God and anointed by Him to the priesthood. Thus Christ says in John 6:45, "They shall all be taught of God." And in Psalm 45:7, "God hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." By "fellows" are meant Christians, Christ's brethren, consecrated to be priests with Him. As Peter also says in 1 Peter 2:9, "Ye are a royal priesthood, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you into his marvelous light."

Now, if Christians have the Word of God and are anointed by Him, they are in duty bound to confess, preach and spread this Word. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:13, "We have the same spirit of faith, and therefore we speak"; and the prophet says in Psalm 116:10, "I believed, therefore I speak"; and in Psalm 51:13, he says in the name of all Christians, "I will teach transgressors thy ways, that sinners may be converted unto thee." These passages prove once more that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God's Word, but is in duty bound to teach it on pain of losing his salvation and forfeiting God's favor.

Now you will say: "But, unless he has been called to do this, he dare not preach, as you yourself have repeatedly taught!" I reply: Here you must consider the Christian from a double point of view. On the one hand, when he is in a place where there are no Christians, he needs no other call than the fact that he is a Christian, inwardly called and anointed by God; he is bound by the duty of brotherly love to preach to the erring heathens or nonchristians and to teach them the Gospel, even though no one

call him to this work. That is what St. Stephen did (Acts 6:8 and Acts 7:2); the office of preaching was not committed to him by the apostles, yet he preached and performed great wonders among the people. Philip, Stephen's fellow-deacon, did the same (Acts 8:5), without having received the office of preaching. The same is true of Apollos (Acts 18:25). In such circumstances the Christian looks, in brotherly love, upon the needs of poor perishing souls, and waits for no commission or letter from pope or bishop. For necessity breaks every law and knows no law; moreover, love is bound to help when there is no one else to help. But, on the other hand, when the Christian is in a place where there are Christians, who have the same power and right as he, he should not thrust himself forward, but should rather let himself be called and drawn forth to preach and teach in the stead and by the commission of the rest. Indeed, a Christian has such power that he may and should arise and teach, even among Christians, without being called of men, in case he finds the teacher in that place to be in error, provided that this be done in a becoming and decent manner. Such a case is plainly described by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:30, where he says, "If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace." Notice what St. Paul does here. He commands the man who is teaching to hold his peace and to retire (among Christians!), and commands the hearer to arise, even without a call, because necessity knows no law.

If then St. Paul here bids anyone, in case of necessity, among Christians, to arise even without a call, and calls him by virtue of this word of God; and if he bids the other to retire, and deposes him by virtue of these words: how much more does an entire Christian congregation have the right to call a man to this office whenever it becomes necessary! And it is always necessary, and never more than now. For in the same passage St. Paul gives to every Christian the power to teach among Christians whenever it becomes necessary, "Ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be admonished"; and, "Desire earnestly to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues; but let all things be done decently and in order." Take this passage as a most sure basis, which gives more than sufficient authority to the Christian congregation to preach, to permit men to preach, and to call preachers. Especially in case of necessity, this passage itself calls everyone in particular, without any call of men; so that we might have no doubt that the congregation which has the Gospel may and should choose and call, out of its number, one who is to teach the Word in its stead.

But now you will say: "St. Paul, however, commanded Timothy and Titus to appoint priests; moreover, we read in Acts 14:23 that Paul and Barnabas appointed priests in their congregations. The congregation cannot, therefore, call anyone, nor can anyone come forward of his own accord to preach among Christians; but we must have the consent and commission of bishops, abbots or other prelates, who sit in the apostles' seat." I reply: If indeed our bishops and abbots sat in the apostles' seat, as they claim, one might speak of letting them do what Titus and Timothy, Paul and Barnabas did when they appointed priests. But now that they sit in the devil's seat, and are wolves, neither preaching the Gospel nor permitting it to be preached, the appointment of men to the office of preaching and pastoral care among Christians concerns them as much as it concerns the Jew and the Turk. Mule drivers and dog leaders, that is what they ought to be!

Moreover, even if they were the right sort of bishops and desired to have the Gospel and to appoint the right sort of preachers, they could not and should not do this without the consent, choice and call of the congregation; except in cases of necessity, in order that souls might not be lost for lack of God's Word. For in such necessity, as we have seen, anyone may provide a preacher, either by personal request or through the power of the secular authorities; nay, he should himself step into

the breach and rise up and teach, if he be able, for necessity is necessity and knows no bounds, just as, when fire breaks out in a town, everyone should hasten to lend a hand and not wait to be asked.

But where no such necessity exists, and where there are those who have the right, the power, and the gift to teach, no bishop ought to appoint anyone without the consent, choice and call of the congregation; it is his duty rather to confirm the man whom the congregation has elected and called. If the bishop does not confirm him, he is none the less confirmed by virtue of the call of the congregation. For neither Titus nor Timothy nor Paul appointed any priest unless he was chosen and called by the congregation. This is clearly proved from Paul's words in Titus 1:7 and 1 Timothy 3:2, "A bishop, or priest, must be blameless"; and, "The deacons must first be proved." Titus certainly did not know who was blameless: this information must needs come from the congregation, who must bring such a one to his attention. We read also in Acts 6:2, with respect to a very minor office, that the apostles themselves did not venture to appoint men to be deacons without the knowledge and consent of the congregation. The congregation, on the contrary, chose and called the seven deacons, and the apostles confirmed them. But if the apostles did not venture, upon their own authority, to appoint men to an office that had to do merely with the distribution of bodily food, how should they have been so bold as to commit to anyone the highest office of all, that of preaching, by their own power and without the knowledge, consent and call of the congregation?

But since in our days the necessity exists, and there is never a bishop to provide evangelical preachers, the example of Titus and Timothy does not apply here. We must rather call a preacher out of the congregation, whether he be confirmed by Titus or not. For the people to whom Titus ministered would or should have done the same, if he had refused to confirm their preachers or if there had been no one else to appoint preachers. These days are altogether unlike the days of Titus; then the apostles ruled and desired the right sort of preachers, but now our despots desire none but wolves and thieves.

And why do the raging tyrants condemn us for electing and calling in this manner? They themselves do the same thing, and have no other way. Among them no one is ever appointed pope or bishop by the authority of one man, but he is elected and called by the chapter and thereupon confirmed by others, bishops by the pope as their superior, but the pope himself by the Cardinal of Ostia as his inferior. And if one should happen not to be confirmed, he is none the less bishop or pope. Now I ask the dear tyrants this question: If the election and call of their congregation can make a man a bishop, and if the pope is pope solely by virtue of his election without confirmation by any other authority, why should not a Christian congregation make a man a preacher solely by virtue of its call? (My argument has the greater force because, forsooth, they regard the estate of bishop and pope as superior to the office of preacher.) Who has granted this right to them and withheld it from us? The more since our call has Scripture in its favor, while theirs is but a human fable without Scripture, whereby they rob us of our rights. They are tyrants and knaves, dealing with us as the devil's apostles are bound to do.

Hence it has also been the custom in certain places that even secular authorities such as burgomasters and princes appointed and salaried their own city and castle preachers, choosing whom they pleased, without the consent or commission of bishops or popes; nor has anyone ever interfered with this custom. I am afraid, however, that it was not done from a correct understanding of their Christian rights; it has come about rather because the spiritual tyrants despised the office of preaching, held it common, and made a sharp distinction between it and the spiritual rule. But it is in

truth the highest office of all, on which all other offices depend and from which they follow; on the other hand, where this office does not exist none of the others can follow. For in John 4:2 we read that Christ did not baptize, but only preached; and Paul boasts in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that he was sent not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel.

Therefore, the man to whom has been committed the office of preaching has committed to him the highest office in the Christian Church. He may then also baptize, say mass, and take full charge of the care of souls. Or if he prefer, he may confine himself to preaching, and leave baptizing and such minor offices to others, as Christ did, and St. Paul, and all the apostles (Acts 6:4). By this we see that our present bishops and spirituals are painted images and no bishops at all. For the highest office, that of the Word, which ought to be their proper work, they leave to the very lowest orders, to chaplains and monks, alms-collectors! To whom they leave also the minor offices, such as baptism and other pastoral acts. Meanwhile they themselves administer confirmation and bless bells, altars and churches, works which are neither Christian nor episcopal, but invented out of their own heads. They are perverse and blind mummers, and nothing but make-believe bishops.