

Ecclesial Activism

The practice of “judicial activism” occurs when “judges decline to apply the Constitution or laws according to their original public meaning or ignore binding precedent and instead decide cases based on personal preference” (The Heritage Foundation). This threat of “legislating from the bench” was anticipated by our nation’s Founding Fathers, who established a “constitutional republic” form of government to ensure that lawmakers would always be elected by and accountable to the citizens of the nation, and that their power to make laws would be limited by the Constitution—the nation’s founding document. The judiciary, in turn, would be separate from this process. Judges were only to decide cases based on the supreme authority of the Constitution, the legally enacted laws of Congress, and the guidance of established precedent. At the swearing-in ceremony for Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in 1998, former president Ronald Reagan stated,

The role assigned to judges in our system was to interpret the Constitution and lesser laws, not to make them. It was to protect the integrity of the Constitution, not to add to it or subtract from it—certainly not to rewrite it. For as the framers knew, unless judges are bound by the text of the Constitution, we will, in fact, no longer have a government of laws, but of men and women who are judges. And if that happens, the words of the documents that we think govern us will be just masks for the personal and capricious rule of a small elite.

It increasingly appears that Reagan’s concerns are becoming reality. Wayne Grudem provides this warning:

I believe that the battle for the control of the judicial system is now the single most important issue for the future of the United States. On the one side of this issue are liberal judges who insist that they will continue to make and uphold new laws as they think best, calling them “interpretations” of the Constitution, and also liberal politicians, who are determined to support the actions of these activist judges. . . . On the other side of this issue are those on the more conservative end of the political spectrum, including many judges who have decided that their task is *only to interpret and apply* the Constitution and the laws of the nation and the states *according to the original intent* of those documents at the time they were written.” (*Politics—According to the Bible*, 150)

What is true of judicial activism is also true of what can be called “**ecclesial activism.**” When ecclesial activism occurs, those entrusted with leadership in the church begin to lead not according to the church’s supreme authority, the written Word of God, but according to personal or community preference. James Anderson, in a blog post entitled “Ecclesial Activism,” explains it well:

What has happened in the US system of government almost exactly parallels what happened in the government of the Christian church over the course of many centuries, a development that finds its fullest expression in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Bible serves as the constitution of the Christian faith. It is the covenant documentation. It defines the Christian church: what constitutes the church, what is its mission, who runs the church and how it should be run, what are the responsibilities of the church, what is the scope of its authority, what laws govern the church and its members, and so forth. Once the constitution has been written, the task of the “judges” (the elders/overseers of the church) is to interpret and apply it according to its original intent. Their task is not to create new laws or to come up with “interpretations” that cannot be found in the text of the constitution itself (interpreted according to original intent) and would never have crossed the minds of the ‘founding fathers’ (Eph 2:20).

Yet that’s just what happened over the course of time with the development of episcopacy, the rise of the papacy, and the increasing weight given to church tradition. . . . If the Bible didn’t say something that the bishops wanted it to say, or thought it should say, they could claim to ‘discover’ new doctrines in the Bible—purgatory, indulgences, apostolic succession, papal infallibility, etc.—and no one would have power to overrule them.

Adapting the candid statement of Chief Justice Hughes [“We are under a Constitution, but the Constitution is what the judge says it is”], today’s Roman Catholic might well put it thus: “We are under the Bible, but the Bible is what the Pope says it is.” In fact, that’s exactly how things stand in practice. Functionally the Pope has become the highest governing authority in his church: *higher even than the Bible*. The church has been derailed by “ecclesial activism.”

Of course, such ecclesial activism is not only inherent within Roman Catholicism. It is also true within *mainline liberal churches* desperate to be “on the right side of history.” For them, evolving social trends have the ultimate authority, and church leaders “legislate from the pulpit” new doctrinal and ethical positions on an almost daily basis—all in the name of “Jesus.” It is also true within *seeker-friendly churches* desperate to be liked by their communities. For them, pragmatism is the philosophy of choice, and church leaders say and do almost anything to draw a crowd and make an impression. For *prosperity churches*, materialism is the name of the game. Their leaders have no limits in finding new and astounding ways to twist the Scriptures and then use them to manipulate their audiences to hand over more cash.

None of these models depicts what God intended for the church. As the people of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit (see Lesson #1, “Defining the Church”), **God intended His church to be formed, filled, governed, and reformed by the Bible**. In contrast to ecclesial activism, God has designed His church to be *ruled by His unchanging Word*.

I. The Word of God Must FORM the Church

As James Anderson mentioned above, the Roman Catholic essentially believes that *the church* formed the Bible. Although the Roman Catholic Church affirms that God’s Word is ultimately authoritative *in theory* (after all, who could deny that?), in practice it argues that the church was responsible for “determining” what was to be in the Bible. In other words, the church determined the extent and limits of its own constitution, not vice versa. Consequently, since the church created its own authority, it maintains a kind of practical authority over it. The church alone—through the magisterium with its power vested in the pope and his bishops—judges what Scripture can or cannot mean, and as any student of history knows, this judgment evolves over time.

But Scripture itself tells a different story—a story that even the earliest of the church fathers affirmed in contradiction to the established dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. J. I. Packer stated it well: “the church no more created the canon than Newton created the law of gravity; recognition is not creation” (*Truth and Power*, 68). Ultimately, **the true church acknowledges that Christ builds His church through His Word**. His Word is ultimate, and the church is subservient to it. His Word is complete and sufficient, and the church must yield and obey.

The truth that the Word forms the church (and not vice versa) is founded upon a prior truth: that **the Word causes personal salvation**. In the same way that it was God’s Word that brought creation into being (see Gen 1; Heb 11:3), so it is that God’s Word brings *believers* into being. **See Romans 10:17; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:22–25.**

But God did not save sinners to remain isolated, individual entities. He gathers them into His *ekklesia*, and it is His Word which brought this church into existence as well. How? Through the preaching and writing ministries of Christ’s appointed apostles and prophets. **See 1 Corinthians 3:10–11; Ephesians 2:19–20.**

This establishment of the church through the ministry of *the Word* is the primary theme of the book of Acts. Noteworthy in the language of Acts is the way in which the relationship between *the Word* and *the church* is described: **see Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20.**

For Luke, the Word clearly precedes the church. It is only where the Word goes that the church is formed. Without the Word there can be no church. **See also Colossians 1:5–6 and 1 Thessalonians 3:1**, where Paul describes “the gospel” and “the word” as that which “came” and “spreads rapidly,” saving sinners and establishing churches. Thus, since it is the Word of God that brings into existence the people of God, the people of God must always be defined by this Word. The church’s definition can never be a matter of personal preference, public opinion, state interpretation, or evolving consensus. How we understand and assess the church must always be *according to Scripture*—the church’s singular constitutional authority.

II. The Word of God Must FILL the Church

The Word of God not only *forms* the church (thereby establishing its nature and purposes), the Word of God must also *fill* the church. An important text that emphasizes this truth is **Colossians 3:16** – “**Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**” The phrase “the word of Christ” refers to the apostolic message about Jesus Christ. It is synonymous with the New Testament language of “the word of the Lord” and “the gospel.” Paul exhorts the Colossian church to allow this word to “dwell richly”—that is, to take up permanent residence to such an extent that it brings lasting transformation. But what is especially notable in this text is that Paul exhorts this to take place “within you.” Paul’s intent here is not to highlight personal Bible study, as important as that is. Instead, his focus is on *the entire church*. Paul intends for the Scriptures to *take up residence* within *the entire local assembly of believers*. As commentator Douglas Moo states, “Paul is urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience” (*Colossians & Philemon*, 286).

Other New Testament texts emphasize this same truth. Consider the instruction of Paul concerning the central role that Scripture is to play in the midst of the assembled church in these texts: **1 Timothy 3:16; 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:16–4:4**.

In response to these and other texts, Al Mohler writes, “Where the authentic preaching of the Word takes place, the church is there. And where that is absent, there is no church. No matter how high the steeple, no matter how large the budget, no matter how impressive the ministry, it is something else” (*Feed My Sheep*, 18).

III. The Word of God Must GOVERN the Church

For a church to be a true church, the members of that church must do more than give the Word of God lip service. They must do more than profess its supremacy as part of a confession of faith. They must submit to its authority *in practice*.

“To govern” means “to control and direct the making and administration of policy,” and “to determine rules for and handle administration of an organization, group, etc.” Therefore, that the Word of God must *govern* the church means that Scripture in the most tangible ways possible must “control and direct” the church’s administration and policies. That the word of God must *govern* the church means that Scripture must “determine rules for” how the congregation worships and fulfills all its purposes.

This necessity is established by **Christ’s headship over the church**. As head of the church, Christ possesses ultimate authority over His people. **See Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18**. Christ mediates this authority *through His Word*, delivered by His apostles. Thus, the apostles spoke as possessing the Lord’s authority. For example, **see 1 Corinthians 14:37–38; 1 John 4:6**. Consequently, the words the apostles have left us in the New Testament are as binding as the very words of Jesus Christ. Whether addressing the nature of church leadership, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the discipline of sinning members, or anything else, these words of Scripture are binding.

The governing role that Scripture is to play in the life of the church was recognized by the early church fathers, who began referring to the Old and New Testaments as “**the canon of truth**” or “**the rule of faith**.” It was recalled later by the Protestant Reformers in their return to the authority of Scripture in what was called “**the regulative principle of Scripture**” (Scripture must “regulate” the practice of church life—particularly of its worship of God). On this point, William Cunningham, the 19th-cent. Scottish church historian and co-founder of the Free Church of Scotland, stated,

It is unwarrantable and unlawful to introduce into the government and worship of the church anything which has not the positive sanction of Scripture. . . . Those who dislike this principle, from whatever cause, usually try to run us into difficulties by putting a very stringent conception upon it and thereby giving it an appearance of absurdity. [But] the principle must be interpreted and explained in the exercise of common sense. (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 27, 32)

The governing role that Scripture is to play was also captured by the 17th cent. Latin phrase used by post-Reformation theologians when they identified the chief implication of *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”): ***norma normans non***

normata – “the norming norm that is not normed.” In other words, God’s Word was given as *the standard* which must be used to evaluate everything else—including creeds, confessions, statements of faith, local church worship, the practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, a pastor’s sermons, and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

IV. The Word of God Must REFORM the Church

We are all familiar with the *law of entropy*, which states that without special intervention, disorder, randomness, and decay naturally increase over time. Left to themselves, things that once were organized naturally break down, lose energy, and become less structured. What is true of the natural realm is also true of the church.

The churches of Revelation 2–3 tell us that the constant threat of decay is real. By the end of the 1st cent., just six decades after the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Christ called on five of seven churches in Asia Minor to “repent.” J. I. Packer summarizes this constant pull toward *deformity* when he writes,

Lapses into the deformity of misbelief and unbelief, ethical error and compromise, apathy and superstition, formality and dead routine, must be expected. So reformation, not only in the negative sense of purging abuses . . . but also in the positive sense of re-forming, or reshaping, through the giving of new scriptural substance to faith and life, will be our chronic need. (*Truth & Power*, 65)

Acknowledging this ever-present danger, theologians in the 17th cent.—not long after the Reformation—coined the Latin phrase, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda verbi Dei* – “the church is reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God.” Apart from vigilance, churches tend toward *deformity*, and then must be *reformed* once again. Traditions accumulate over time. These traditions and the intentions that birthed them may initially be “good,” but without constant subjection to Scripture, they inevitably usurp the role which God’s Word alone can hold.

What is the solution? The Word of God must act as *the agent of reformation*. As Christ commanded the churches in Asia Minor, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

For Discussion

1. Do you believe the Bible is the written Word of God and the ultimate rule for faith and practice? If yes, how does this show in your personal use of the Word? How does this show in what you expect from the church?
2. Have you recently left a church? What was your reason for leaving it? Was that reason grounded in what the Bible requires the church to be, or was it grounded in personal preferences?
3. Discuss ways in which the centrality of God’s Word should manifest itself in the local church. Are these ways evident in your church? How can you help the leadership of your church maintain zeal for the centrality of Scripture?
4. If you suspect that your church may be abandoning the Scriptures and engaging in “ecclesial activism,” how should you respond? Is this something to which you can turn a blind eye?
5. What are the common things that people look for in a church? Based on this study, how would you answer the question, “What should I really look for in a church?”

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:16–17
2. **Read (intermediate):** *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 4th edition, by Mark Dever, pages 41–64.
3. **Listen to:** “The Authority of God’s Word,” by John MacArthur, preached February 1, 1998, accessible at this link: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/80-182/the-authority-of-gods-word>.
4. **Sing:** “Speak, O Lord” (#368 in *Hymns of Grace*).
5. **Ponder:** The phrases “the canon of truth,” “the regulative principle of Scripture,” *norma normans non normata*, and *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda verbi Dei*, are all part of our spiritual heritage. In your own words, provide a definition of each phrase and an explanation for why each one is important.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: September 23, 7pm – “*Ekklesia*: Elders and Deacons”