

office-bearers? Thus Chapter 18 of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) describes the authority of ministers as “more like a service than a dominion.”

Having seen that the Lord Jesus is the source of apostolic authority and that, therefore, the authority of the apostles (and all church office-bearers) is circumscribed and ministerial, we now turn to the purpose of apostolic authority. Paul states that it is “for edification, and not for your destruction” (II Cor. 10:8).

The goal or purpose of the apostolic authority, office and labours is to build up the church and certainly not to destroy the people of God. Jehovah’s punishment of the reprobate on the legal basis of their sin is subservient to the apostles’ glorious primary desire and purpose: the salvation of the elect by the cross and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

It is in this context that Paul speaks of the power and efficacy of preaching and church discipline to bring God’s true people to repentance and faith: “the weapons of our warfare are ... mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds [by] casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (4-5).

The apostle explains that his armaments are not fleshly, carnal or worldly, appealing to earthly or base motives. His arsenal of the preaching of the Word and church discipline—exercised prayerfully and to the glory of God—is spiritual, addressing man’s mind or soul or conscience: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal ... bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (3-4, 5).

A heartfelt understanding of the source of apostolic authority guides the church and its office-bearers to an exercise of ecclesiastical authority that is ministerial not lordly (I Pet. 5:3) and circumscribed by God’s Word. Likewise, a true appreciation of the purpose of apostolic authority (the salvation of the elect, not their destruction) commits a faithful church to the prayerful use of the spiritual means appointed by God (preaching, sacraments and discipline), trusting that His grace alone will make them effectual for the calling and sanctification of those eternally chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

The crucial importance of really believing and rightly exercising ecclesiastical authority is underscored by *Belgic Confession* 29’s description of its sinful abuse: “As for the false church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does she administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper; she relieth more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry.”

*Rev. Stewart*

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# *Covenant Reformed News*

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## **The Source and Purpose of Apostolic Authority**

Two articles in the previous two issues of the *News* took their cue from II Corinthians 10:8, “For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed.” These instalments explained the right of the apostles to serve God in three spheres: teaching, ruling and showing mercy. Now, finally, we shall treat the source and purpose of the authority exercised by the twelve apostles and the apostle Paul, drawing out vital lessons for the church in our day.

Jesus Christ is the origin or source of apostolic authority: “our authority, which *the Lord* hath given us” (8). The Triune God has granted to His incarnate, obedient and glorified Son the right to reign over the entire universe, and He exercises His authority in the church in part through the apostles. Thus our risen Saviour declared to the Eleven, “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” (Matt. 28:18-20). Christ Jesus is “the Apostle and High Priest of our profession” (Heb. 3:1); the supreme One whom God sent later commissioned His apostles.

For the sake of completeness, we should add from Ephesians 4:11 that our ascended Head also gave and gives others to instruct His church: “prophets” and “evangelists” (extraordinary and temporary office-bearers), and “pastors” who are “teachers” (ordinary and permanent office-bearers). Christ also equips and appoints elders and deacons to serve His congregations (I Tim. 3).

Since the Lord Jesus is the origin of apostolic authority, Paul and the Twelve possessed a derived authority, a ministerial authority and a circumscribed authority. Likewise, the authority of all the lower office-bearers in the New Testament church (prophets, evangelists, teaching pastors, ruling elders and deacons) is derived and ministerial, and circumscribed or limited to their respective spheres.

Christ told the twelve disciples, “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28). If this is true regarding the awesome authority of apostles, how much more regarding pastors, elders and deacons, the church’s ordinary and permanent

## Satan's Everlasting Punishment

We will now answer a second question about the devil: "Since Satan and demons are pure spirits, how can we conceive of their suffering eternal punishment in the lake of fire without bodies? Presumably it will reflect the spiritual suffering of all the damned, a real sense of confinement, misery and God's wrath?" I believe the questioner has answered his own question in speaking of "the spiritual suffering of all the damned, a real sense of confinement, misery and God's wrath," but I would like to elaborate in this article.

It is impossible to believe that the suffering of hell, whether of Satan or of the ungodly and unbelieving, is in a *literal* lake of fire so the question raises one of the difficulties with that kind of literalism. Even though unbelievers are resurrected (John 5:28-29) before being cast into eternal suffering, it is difficult to imagine that they could endure eternal fire without being consumed, i.e., it is hard to understand how any kind of body could endure that kind of suffering. As spirits, Satan and his demons are not at all subject to the torments of fire.

The clearest argument against a literal lake of fire, however, is the fact that Scripture does not always describe hell in those terms. It is described as the pit (Isa. 14:15), as the worm that never dies (Mark 9:43-48), as weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:42), as a furnace of fire (Matt. 13:42, 50), as outer darkness (Matt. 22:13), as chains of darkness (II Pet. 2:4) and as drinking the wine of the wrath of God (Rev. 14:10).

Hell cannot literally be all of these things and the obvious conclusion, therefore, is that they are figures of speech used to emphasize its horrible torments. Anyone who has suffered severe burns knows that agony and why it is used as a description of hell. The torment of being eaten by worms, as Herod was (Acts 12:23), may be even worse. Darkness, the kind of darkness one experiences in a deep cave or the kind of darkness that came on Egypt as the ninth plague (Ex. 10:21-23), is horrifying as well. All of these only hint at the far greater terror and torment of hell.

What, then, is the horror of hell, the "spiritual suffering" referred to by the questioner? It is the horror and torment of being forever separated from God. II Thessalonians 1:9 describes this: "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." This was the first punishment for sin and will be sin's final punishment. God is the source of all blessing, life, peace, light and hope, and to be cut off from Him is to be forever separated from all that is good (James 1:17). This is the reason, too, why hell is described as darkness in Scripture and as death. Those who do not believe cannot have fellowship with God who is light (I John 1:5-6) and "to live apart from God is death."

Eternal punishment in hell is a matter of exquisite justice. Those who separated themselves from God, and rejected and despised Him, will be given by God Himself what they themselves have wanted and chosen, and they will be given it for eternity.

Heaven is the opposite. The glory of heaven is not literal harps and streets of gold. It is not only the blessedness of no more tears and suffering, but also the glory and blessed-

ness of being with the living God forever. Revelation 21 and 22 teach this repeatedly. "They shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (21:3). "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (22-23). "And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads" (22:4).

Heaven is enjoying the love and favour of God forever, while hell is suffering the wrath of God for eternity. As with God's love, His wrath is not an empty emotion, but something powerful and effective that forever burns against sinners, driving them from His gracious and loving presence. He is a "consuming fire" against those who turn away from Him. For this reason, too, hell is death, not dissolution but the eternal dying of those who will never see life (John 3:36). This is God's curse, the powerful and effective Word of His anger, that drives someone forever from His presence. This is why hell is no different for Satan and his minions than for unbelieving men and women.

This is what Christ suffered on behalf of those whom the Father had given Him. He experienced that separation from God and His divine wrath when, during the three hours of darkness on the cross, He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is His descent into hell. There was no need for Him to go to the actual place of eternal torment, because He suffered the "inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies" of being under the wrath of God against sin (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 44).

Our Lord's Supper form states, "that He assumed our flesh and blood; that He bore for us the wrath of God (under which we should have perished everlastingly) from the beginning of His incarnation to the end of His life upon earth; and that He hath fulfilled for us all obedience to the divine law and righteousness; especially when the weight of our sins and the wrath of God pressed out of Him the bloody sweat in the garden, where He was bound that we might be freed from our sins; that He afterwards suffered innumerable reproaches, that we might never be confounded; that He was innocently condemned to death, that we might be acquitted at the judgment-seat of God; yea, that He suffered His blessed body to be nailed on the cross, that He might fix thereon the handwriting of our sins; and hath also taken upon Himself the curse due to us, that He might fill us with His blessings; and hath humbled Himself unto the deepest reproach and pains of hell, both in body and soul, on the tree of the cross, when He cried out with a loud voice, *My God, my God! why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34) that we might be accepted of God and never be forsaken of Him; and finally confirmed with His death and shedding of His blood the new and eternal testament, that covenant of grace and reconciliation, when He said: *It is finished* (John 19:30)."

That He suffered the wrath of God and separation from God is a mystery too deep to fathom. He who took on Himself the curse due to us was God's beloved Son in whom God was well pleased. Nor is it necessary for us to comprehend what He endured. It is ours to believe that He did, and so to be saved from the wrath to come and to have the hope of seeing God face to face in Jesus Christ.

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