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A Simple Question

Behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

1 Kings 19:11-12

I sank down in the couch with my head in my hands. Disgust gave way to fear as I contemplated the chain of events during the past few months. Several of us in the church had just made what appeared to be the final appeal to our leaders, urging them to reconsider their decision to publicly disgrace and discipline a beloved pastor. To make matters worse, many other atrocities were exposed in the course of our appeals which our leaders denied and minimized despite overwhelming evidence.

We had no idea where we could find an appropriate forum to hold these men accountable for their callous behavior. After all, it was *their* job to handle these kinds of things . . . wasn't it? Our church had always been taught that leaders had a special anointing that the rest of us laypeople did not possess. But now they were causing harm! What were we supposed to do?

A wave of discouragement and frustration washed over me as I realized that, despite our best efforts, the men responsible for the devastation and destruction of our brother would be adjudicating their *own* despicable behavior! The senior pastor who had led the charge was going to be held accountable by three of his own loyal colleagues. How could they possibly be impartial judges? Their paychecks were even signed by the same man they were supposed to impartially judge! The absurdity was laughable.

Something felt very, very wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. How could our church have found itself in this situation? Wasn't it supposed to be "the pillar and foundation of the truth?" More questions clouded my mind. Did the Bible really teach and expect a congregation to give leaders such unconditional loyalty, submission, and obedience simply *because* they were leaders? Was there no biblical recourse in difficult situations like the one we now faced? Were laypeople like me just supposed to "know our place" and trust our leaders to take care of things since they were "keeping watching over our souls?" At least, that's what we were taught from Hebrews 13:17. Were we really supposed to unconditionally obey our leaders "with joy and not with groaning," even in the

face of gross misconduct and bad teaching? Was a church supposed to remain passive and impotent, paralyzed by blind obedience, while its leaders' sins suffocated the congregation?

Another wave of despair washed away any remaining hope I might have had.

“What am I to do?!” I cried to the Lord. “What are *we* to do as a church?!”

And then, as if carried by a gentle breeze from heaven, the still, small voice of God pierced my troubles with a single question:

Does the church have authority?

Instantly, hope flushed through me. I had never even considered this simple idea.

Over the next year, this new concept profoundly changed my life. It seemed like every waking moment I was turning the question over in my mind. As I dug into the Word with renewed zeal, I found myself refreshed with hope and emboldened in faith as each new nugget of truth began to shape new convictions in me. In my excitement, I often found myself preaching mini-sermons to my wife and children on the wonder, brilliance, and beauty of the *authority of the church* that permeated the New Testament. This simple truth fundamentally changed our lives—first as individual believers, then later as members of the body of Christ. Indeed, it began to liberate our souls and provide hope and direction as we navigated the difficult but exciting waters ahead. For the first time in our Christian lives, we envisioned a strong, robust, and participatory church as reflected throughout the New Testament. With new eyes, we began to see God's people embrace their responsibility to choose leaders, be centrally involved in making weighty decisions and judgments, provide input on finances, and to send and receive leaders as they ministered among other New Testament congregations.

As we studied the Scriptures, it felt like we were beholding the majesty of the Church for the first time. The new paradigm we were starting to embrace was completely contrary to that which was taught by our former leaders. They had had a vested interest to maintain authority over the

congregation at any cost, so they continually preached sermons designed to convince our church to unconditionally obey and submit to them. They said they had a “special anointing” and greater spiritual aptitude, so they were always emphasizing our obligation to remain subservient to them, the elite few, who were “over us in the Lord.”

Little by little, the ominous and foreboding stronghold of thoughts, ideas, and teachings we had believed and practiced for years began to crumble in front of us. Like Saul, the scales fell from our eyes as we enthusiastically studied God’s Word, filling us with hope and joy as we began to see clearly the majesty, glory, awesome responsibility, and authority given to God’s people. With newfound insight and direction, we slowly disentangled ourselves from a cultic expression of Christianity and began to experience freedom and healing as a family by denouncing and repenting of the toxic church culture and value system that had plagued our lives for so long. As our knowledge and understanding of what it meant to be a responsible church member steadily grew, we realized that God, through His word, had indeed answered the surprising question He had whispered to me during one of the most troubling times of my Christian life. The story of that answer and how it profoundly changed our lives is in the pages that follow.