AUTHORITY

This is a lesson about authority, and who / how rules governing religious observation and practices are determined.

Two events happened during the week of June 14th that puts at the forefront the issue of religious/church authority.

On Friday of that week, the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States, overwhelmingly voted to draft guidance on the sacrament of the Eucharist, advancing a push by conservative bishops to deny President Biden communion because of his support of abortion rights. The measure was approved by a vote of 73% in favor and 24% opposed. For the resolution to take effect – and the President to be denied communion – the bishops’ conference would need either unanimous support or two-thirds support and the Vatican’s approval. Pope Francis has not commented on the vote, suggesting that he will not approve it. See “Pope’s Silence Speaks Volumes on Controversial Communion Vote by U.S. Bishops,” New York Times June 20, 2021.

Earlier in the week, the Southern Baptist Convention (“SBC”) elected a new leader for the next two years. He is Ed Litton, a pastor from Alabama who is thought to be more moderate than some of the other contenders. Mr. Litton was elected over another candidate who was thought to be more conservative, and who would have pushed the SBC away from farther left positions on social issues. The vote, according to one video, was an effort to “stop the drift” on issues such as racial equity and reconciliation and sexual orientation.

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28:18). Jesus said in John 14:10 that “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

Paul said in Romans 13:1 that “[f] or there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (speaking about establishment of civil authorities).

There are many difficult religious questions today that have the possibility of splitting churches. It is very easy to say “we will do what the Bible says.” But how do you deal with issues where the authority is not clearly stated, or where the Bible does not speak precisely to the issue now faced. For instance, the Bible does not directly whether a person who condones abortion can take communion. Where and how do you look to authority to answer this and other difficult questions?