

Submitting to God's Ordained Authority

Part I

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Carolyn and I recently spent several days in a church that was in trouble here in America. When we arrived, it became clear to us almost immediately that there were several elements within the congregation who were refusing to submit to the authority of the senior pastor and his leadership board. Oh, there were those who supported the senior pastor and his leaders. But there were others who supported an associate pastor who himself would not submit to his pastor's authority. There were some who wanted the old pastor back who had retired a few years ago. There were even some former church board members who wanted to get back on the board so they could try to control the pastor or, better still, get him to resign or be removed!

We joined with the senior pastor and his leaders and stood against the rebellious group within the congregation. The people demanding the pastor's removal could point to no sin in his life or to a moral failure. His personal life was not at issue. Nor was his doctrine unbiblical. They simply didn't like his style or the way he ran the church. We heard these kinds of statements from those who wanted his removal. "We have been hurt since he came because he doesn't do things the way we used to do them." "We want our old church back." "Why doesn't he just leave and let us run things the way we did before he came."

On the way back to California, Carolyn and I realized that over the years we have written quite extensively on the subject of our authority in Christ. But this mess in a local church reminded us that we have never written much on the subject of *being under authority*. The Bible has much to say about how God has established His authority on earth and how those under that authority are blessed but that those who rebel against that authority are cursed.

"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." (John 7:17 NIV) What this means to us is simply this: God looks at both our *heart* and our *human will*. If He sees a heart that is willing to do His will, He then opens the eyes of that heart and mind to *understand His teachings and His will*. Otherwise, we are as the blind leaders of Israel in Jesus' time that John was referring to when he quoted Isaiah 6:10. "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn--and I would heal them." (Jn 12:40 NIV) But if we are willing to do His will, Jesus says, ". . . blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." (Mat 13:16 NIV)

God Establishes All Authority

Scripture unequivocally states that God is the One who sets *all* authority in place, both civil and ecclesiastic. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, *for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*" (Rom 13:1,2 NIV, emphasis added.) Although Paul is speaking specifically of civil authority in this passage, the same principle certainly applies to church authority.

Under Authority

Note the command we find in Hebrews. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." (Heb 13:17 NIV) This not a divine suggestion, it is a command.

Now let's ask the question, "Why is it so important to submit to authority?" The answer to this question is at least twofold.

The first is that *you must be under authority in order to have authority*. The Roman Centurion in Matthew's gospel illustrates this principle for us.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man *under authority*, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith . . ." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour. (Mat 8:5-13 NIV, emphasis added.)

This Roman soldier understood that unless he was *under* authority he *had no authority!* In fact, he had a better grasp of this principle than did the learned, trained teachers of Israel!

Would to God that Christians today understood this principle. Instead, we have many Christians who are under

no authority running all over the world speaking, rebuking the devil (and other Christians who disagree with them), and anyone else who displeases them. Sadly, they believe that what they speak is really going to happen. Authority flows down from the Lord through His ordained chain of authority. If we are not in that chain of authority, we are speaking only our own words. Jeremiah knew that and stated it well. "Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?" (Lam 3:37 NIV) Our authority, both in the natural and spiritual realm, is nonexistent unless we are in submission to and in the chain of God's ordained authority.

The second extremely important reason why we must submit to authority is that *those who rebel against God's ordained authority bring judgment on themselves*. When we read Romans 13:1 and 2, we realize that we bring judgment on ourselves if we rebel against authority. Let me state those two verses again, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. *Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*" (Rom 13:1,2 NIV, emphasis added.) (We will say more about rebellion later in the article.)

Authority Figures

God's word plainly tells us to submit to those in authority over us. "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." (Rom 13:5 NIV) "But what about those in authority who are oppressive and unfair?" Good question. Most of us find it easy to submit to people who are gentle, kind, benevolent, and always fair. But often we find authority figures over us who are authoritative, autocratic, harsh, cruel, and heartless. What must we do in these cases?

Unfortunately, God's word doesn't differentiate between different kinds of authorities. Romans 13:5 simply says, ". . . it is necessary to submit to authorities. . . ." It didn't qualify the submission only to those who are "good." This is where Peter's exhortation comes into play. "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God . . . this is commendable before God." (1 Pet 2:19,20 NIV)

The Christian needs to understand that, in the bigger picture, God is using the harsh authority figure to crucify sin in our own flesh. When we willingly submit to harsh, unfair, or oppressive authority--committing ourselves to the Lord--something inside of us breaks and mellows. The end result is that we are conformed more to the image of Jesus.

Old Testament stories are given to us, at least in part, as lessons to be learned. Speaking of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, Paul wrote, "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered

over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did." (1 Cor 10:5,6 NIV)

Look at Joseph when he was falsely accused of molesting his master's wife and cast into prison. He didn't whine or indulge in self-pity. He trusted God and God eventually not only liberated him, but promoted him. Joseph's human nature did have some difficulty with the unfairness with which he was treated, but he took it to God and allowed the unfair treatment to change him. I believe he never would have been promoted without such change.

A very mature apostle here in America recently made this statement to us about submission to authorities. "Unless you have submitted to an authority figure you know is absolutely wrong, you have not really learned to submit to authority." I totally agree!

But What About Evil Authority?

I want to make a distinction here. Down through history there have been many people in key places who were downright evil and wicked. Yet Romans 13 tells us that no authority exists except that which God has established. Then how are we to view the Neros, Hitlers, Stalins, and others who have plagued humankind with their murderous evil? Did God set Hitler in power? Did God place Stalin over the Soviet Union?

Carolyn and I have discussed these questions a number of times. Being a prophet she has a very sensitive sense of justice. Justice is denied thousands, even millions, of people under the oppressive rule of evil men such as these. Again, Scripture provides us with the answer.

Before Israel had a king, they were ruled by God through judges. But Israel saw the other nations around them had kings and they demanded a king for themselves. God planned to eventually give them a king of His choosing about 40 years in the future. God had David in the making to be Israel's king. But they wanted a king *now*. So God gave them a king according to their desires! He gave them Saul. Saul was tall, handsome, intimidating in appearance . . . *everything they wanted*. Saul became a very evil, oppressive king. Saul was not God's choice, he was the people's choice. (See 1 Sam 8:6-22.)

God does establish civil authority in kings, presidents, rulers, and legislative bodies. He also establishes church leaders. I believe this includes pastors and elders. He has His choice as to whom these people are to be . . . but if we persist in having our way, He will let us have who we demand! Knowing this has changed my prayer for the selection of leaders! My prayer now for the choosing of leaders is that God will place the one He wants in that position.

Categories of Authority

For ease of analysis, let me divide God's established authority into four broad categories: civil, family, community, and church or ecclesiastic.

1. Civil

Every society must have rule of law and a properly constituted leader or group of leaders or it will be a chaotic society. Government must function from the lowest civil servant at the neighborhood office to the ruler over the country. That is why, when a policeman stops you for some violation, his voice is in actuality the voice of the government. Yet, how many Christians speak disrespectfully to or about a policeman or some other lower level civil servant.

We see that God established the line of authority in the Old Testament. Indeed, much of Old Testament Scripture is devoted to ordering the Israelite nation under God's and His appointed leaders' authority. God specifically put the Old Testament prophets in place to exercise authority, but look how often the people disregarded them, even killing them when they didn't like the message. The whole nation got into trouble over and over again when it disregarded God's appointed authority over it.

2. Family

God certainly has established the family, beginning with Adam and Eve. He is the God of families. He ordained marriage and gave man the responsibility as head of the household. Husbands are to have Christ-like ultimate authority over the family and parents are to likewise have authority over their children. The Lord gave us the commandment to honor our father and mother. (Deut 5:16) What does this say about those who *do not* honor their father and mother? The clear implication is that it will not go well with them, and life will be shorter than normal, in addition to removing themselves from under God's protective, covering authority. In light of this, it is no wonder that we see such lawlessness in the world today, beginning with rebellion in families.

Again, let me add that I know not all husbands or parents are good and worthy of respect. In fact, some bring evil deeds into the family and visit great harm on their wives and children. In these cases, the general principle of honor still applies, but as always, true respect of a parent or other member of a family must be earned by acting in a Christ-like manner.

3. Community

In the community category we can group employment, educational institutions, clubs and the like. I believe that even here God has set His authority in place. Respect for authority and submission to it is of particular importance in our work places and schools. Obedience to the boss is a

habit we should develop. Obedience to teachers is equally important.

Peter put it well when he was teaching slaves proper Christian behavior.

Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Pet 2:17-21 NIV)

4. The Church

The Universal Church - If God sets civil, family, and community authorities over us, how much more appropriate is it that we submit to our church leaders as God's ordained authority over us? We see in Acts and in Paul's letters that God appointed him and that he used his authority to set eldership and church leaders in place.

Church leaders are selected in different ways in today's church. One common practice is for a church board to select a pastor and ask the congregation to confirm their selection. Or sometimes a denomination will place a pastor in a local church without the consent of the local church body. But God is behind the placement. Then, within the local church, God has established the ecclesiastical authority as the senior pastor, associate pastors, elders, and deacons. For denominations this would include the denominational overseer, regional overseers, district bishops, and pastors. For apostles who have established churches under them, they are the designated authority over these churches.

The Local Church - Let us now examine how a local church should be ordered.

The Senior Pastor - The senior pastor is the ultimate authority over his or her church body. He is responsible before God for everything that happens, or does not happen, in that church. He will ultimately answer to God for his conduct and leadership over that church.

The Pastoral Staff - If there are other pastors on staff, they should consider themselves under the authority of their senior pastor. They are responsible for their specific areas of leadership, but ultimately the senior pastor is responsible and is in authority over all other staff members.

Leadership Boards (Elders and Deacons) - I believe the best run churches are those who have strong leadership boards who work in concert with the senior pastor and the

rest of the staff. Those on these elder and deacon boards should respect one another and be willing to submit to the majority in most matters. They should respect their pastor and give him the honor due him. On the other hand, no senior pastor should have a rubber stamp board. He or she should welcome those on the board who will ask questions and be willing to speak up when something seems not quite right. If a senior pastor surrounds himself with only "yes men," he will ultimately get into trouble.

The Congregation - The congregation should submit to the leadership that is in place in the church. If the leadership boards are elected, or approved by a vote of the congregation, that submission is easier.

If everyone in the church understands his or her position in the line of authority in the local body, then there is harmony. Those who exercise authority should always do so in a prayerful manner and with a servant's heart. Godly leadership will produce a godly congregation. Under these circumstances, those who refuse to submit will usually end up leaving the church, even though they can stir up trouble on their way out!

Benefits of Being Under Authority

One of the primary benefits of being under authority is that it produces discipline within the believer. We need only look at a few of the proverbs to see that a life of discipline pleases our Lord. "He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray." (Pro 10:17 NIV) "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid." (Pro 12:1 NIV) "He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored." (Pro 13:18 NIV) "He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding." (Pro 15:32 NIV) Hebrews tells us, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those

who have been trained by it." (Heb 12:11 NIV)

Looking back to the Roman Centurion, he was a man who understood the discipline of submitting to authority and of exercising authority correctly. Certainly, if you have ever known an undisciplined person, they bring so much trouble on themselves that could be avoided if they were more disciplined.

Another wonderful benefit of being under God's ordained authority is that He protects those who are under His covering. Remember the interesting story in Numbers, 23? It is the story of a pagan king named Balak and a prophet named Balaam. The Israelites were coming near Balak's territory during their passage from Egypt to the Promised Land. Balak didn't like it and he hired Balaam to curse Israel. But when Balaam opened his mouth to curse Israel, blessings came forth! (See Numbers 23.) In fact, one of the blessings was, "There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel . . ." (Num 23:23 NIV)

This proclamation from the mouth of the Lord through Balaam sets forth one of the most powerful protections that Christians have. When we put ourselves under God's divine order and authority, there is no power in hell or on earth that can prevail against us! No curse can prevail and no divination of the devil can succeed. This principle does not mean that God's children will never suffer adversity as long as they remain under His covering authority. There are times when God's obedient servants suffer greatly. Joseph, Daniel, Jeremiah, Paul and a host of others suffered greatly. But it does mean that ultimately the Christian under God's authority will have the victory in the end!

In Parts II and III of this article we will address how and why we rebel against God's authority and the consequences of that rebellion. We will also discuss the biblical approach required if a local church's leadership is out of God's order.

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