

## Biblical Authority

Authority and submission – it is the way our world is set up. From the circumstances you grow up in, the family, to the church you attend, your workplace, the very land you live in – there will always be authority. And with authority, there will always either be submission or rebellion. Life could work no other way.

For there to be order, for us to make sense out of life, for there to be any progress in any direction – there needs to be direction, planning, organising, controlling. There needs to be leadership. In order for that leadership to mean anything, there have to be those who follow those leaders. There has to be submission, or there will be nothing but chaos and anarchy.

In this two-part series, let's examine authority and submission, beginning here with a look at biblical authority. So many people wrestle with the issues of authority and submission on a very practical level – like knowing, what does submission mean in the context of an abusive husband? Or is a wicked government there by God's design, and can we resist them?

What does a wife or a child do when the father or husband simply refuses to act like a leader in the home? What does a church do with an abusive pastor? What is authority supposed to do, and what is submission? These and many other issues become clearer as we study the Bible's perspective on biblical authority and submission.

God set the world up with authority and submission because He is, by nature – the final authority. He is the Sovereign Ruler, the King. There is no democracy in Heaven – God is the Lord of Lords. He was not voted into that position, He always was, and always will be. His divine right to rule proceeds from His very nature, from the fact that all there is to rule is the work of His hands.

When God created the world, He made humankind to reflect His glory. We were meant to be caretakers of the world God had made. Man was meant to be an under-ruler, one with delegated authority from the final authority. We were meant to use our God-given authority to provide order and beauty to God's creation. There was a chain of command, and man was under God.

However, mankind sinned. This brought a horrible perversion into the mix. Man's sinful pride now believed he had a right to rule himself. Sin brought the self-deception that man's authority was not delegated from God, but self-generated. Man now believed he was a law unto himself. He believed the power to rule came from within. Indeed, Satan's original lie, "*Ye shall be as gods*" (**Genesis 3:5**) sits firmly entrenched in the minds of humans. We believe that we can rule for no other reason than 'I am.'

Not only that, but sin perverted the point of authority. As we said, man was supposed to reflect glory back to his Creator. Whether as husbands, parents, spiritual leaders, managers or the rulers of nations, these positions were given to promote the chief end of life – to magnify God and enjoy Him forever. Instead, sin has made man think he is an end in himself.

Man now believes that he can use his authority in the home, in the church, in the workplace, in the community and country to exalt himself. He, like the Pharisees, can sit in Moses' seat – the place of authority – without seeing or realising the point of that place. Man's foolish pride now enjoys authority for its own sake. The feeling of ruling over others, of being obeyed and of being respected strokes the same urge Adam and Eve succumbed to in the garden – to be a god.

We hardly need speak on what pain this has brought our world. **Proverbs 29:2** sums it up: *"When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn."* People mourn when the wicked rule. When a human uses their authority in an unbiblical way – it hurts. It abuses; it destroys.

From the child whose heart is wounded by the poor example of the parent to the wife who feels the spiritual vacuum caused by her husband's disinterest in spiritual things; from the nation that feels the brunt of immoral laws and slack punishment of evildoers, to the employee who groans under the weight of an unyielding and cruel manager. From the verbally or physically abusive husband to the distant and uninvolved pastor – the pain of poor leadership hurts all under it.

When the wicked rule, the people mourn. When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice. In order to find out what biblical, or God-pleasing authority is, we need to see what it is not. Scripturally, we find two extremes when it comes to authority that violates God's pattern.

## 1. The abusive leader

The abusive leader seeks not to please God, but to please himself. He does this through excessive control. Though his diligent work-ethic masks his selfish desires, he nonetheless leads selfishly. He is not seeking to be a chain in God's authority, but to assume the very place of final authority through his controlling ways.

A classic example of an abusive leader in Scripture is King Saul. Saul was not leading Israel to worship God. Ultimately, he was leading Israel to follow him. We see this in the extreme jealousy he displays when David is praised above him. His focus is not on the *point* of his leadership – to mould Israel into a God-fearing nation – but on the place of his leadership: being king. If he felt David was threatening that, he sought to kill him.

From the start, Saul showed some **telltale signs of an abusive leader**:

- **He is threatened easily.**

An abusive leader is consciously or unconsciously self-protective. He reacts very quickly to any perceived threat to his position. It doesn't take Saul long to begin hurling javelins around the palace after he sees how the people love David. Though his solution is to always throw more

power at the problem, to turn up the volume, or increase the verbal assault, his self-protection shows he is actually a coward.

He will not surrender his leadership to the scrutiny of others, and so seeks to obliterate the critics before they can say anything. Saul is always more concerned about his image than his usefulness as a king. Even when Samuel announces his time as king is up, Saul is most concerned about how that will look, not what it means. He is proud, and aims to pleasing himself.

- **He manipulates people's emotions.**

Saul is a master at this. We find him playing the pity-me role when he laments, *"and there is none of you that is sorry for me,"* in **1 Samuel 22:8**. He calls his own son *"the son of a perverse rebellious woman,"* and of his own daughter, he exclaims *"why have you deceived me?"* Saul wasn't exactly a family man – which is often the case with abusive leaders. It's hard to be tender and controlling at the same time.

The abusive leader does not lead by engaging people on their level, he leads by twisting people's emotions so as to do what he wants. It may be through playing the martyr, it may be through being very charming, it may be through violence and fear-producing anger, but ultimately, the abusive leader does not want to lead people, he wants to control them. It enables him to maintain the distance which makes him feel comfortable. He's pleasing himself in his leadership, not God.

- **He drives from behind with force, instead of leading from the front by example.**

Saul ended up running around the countryside with a sword in his hand, a bloodthirsty man. The abusive leader deceives himself saying he's just trying to get the job done. In his proud mind, things would be fine if people just did it their way. What he cannot or more likely refuses to see is that he is himself not in submission to God. His controlling ways do not reflect Christ, but a fleshly, foolish spirit.

Because he is in rebellion to God in his overall character, he will always be fighting a losing battle. He will be trying to convince those under him to submit to God, when he himself is not doing that in his character. He throws power at the problem, and twists people into submission, which will never bring lasting results. He succeeds in getting things done, not because he is leading biblically, but because people fear him. In that way, he has failed.

Biblical authority is supposed to reflect the final authority. When people cannot see further than the human leader, that leader has failed, he has clouded the image of Christ with his own fleshliness. Cattle are driven, but sheep are led. The abusive leader drives people with force and cruelty, because necessarily, his fleshly spirit means he is not in front of the people, leading by example.

## **2. The abdicating leader**

On the other end of the scale, we find the abdicating leader. This leader seeks not to please God, but to please himself, by refusing responsibility. He withdraws from responsibilities and passively lets things go.

This is the father who does nothing but watch sport and browse online; this is the pastor who does nothing more than provide a sermonette for Sunday; this is the government minister who lets the public's complaints wash over him while he plays golf. These leaders please themselves by withdrawing from the difficulties of authority by simply neglecting their responsibilities altogether.

A classic example of the abdicating leader in Scripture is the priest Eli. Eli was a man who refused to exercise his God-given authority over his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. His sons were wicked: they were abusing the people, committing fornication in the Tabernacle, eating portions of sacrifices that didn't belong to them, and discouraging people from coming to the tabernacle.

What did Eli do about it? What all abdicating leaders do – nothing. He passed a limp-wristed remark to his sons: *"Nay my sons, it is no good report that I hear..."* (**1 Samuel 2:23**). But did he exercise any authority in the situation? No. They continued with their wickedness. Eventually, God judged him and his sons.

Like the abusive leader, the **abdicating leader also has a few tell-tale signs:**

- **He withdraws from life by escapism.**

He amuses himself, watches TV, surfs the Internet, and like the sluggard, lulls himself into a make-believe world where if he shuns responsibility, it will go away. He thinks if he can avoid taking on his God-given responsibility by plunging into fantasy, it will be okay. It's interesting because fantasy is an attempt to live in a world where you can control everything, so the abdicating leader is really also a coward. He also wants to control, but doesn't have the boldness to do so, so he withdraws to a world of his own where he can.

- **He is essentially slothful about the responsibility of leading.**

Eli was the High Priest. It was his responsibility to grab his sons by the scruff of the neck and chuck them out of the Tabernacle. He refused to do so. Like the sluggard who procrastinates, chooses comfort over conflict, and makes excuses for his lack of work, the abdicating leader has endless reasons why he doesn't discipline his children, why he is not involved in the lives of his people, why he does not commit and buckle down to building the marriage.

The abdicating leader feels his passive approach make him harmless, and therefore, no great sinner. Like the sluggard, who feels the smallness of his surrenders ("*yet a little sleep, a little slumber*" of **Proverbs 6:10**) make him no big sinner, this kind of leader feels the quiet nature of his refusal to lead simply make him a shy guy, a nice guy, or a reserved type of person. However, this is choosing man-pleasing over God-pleasing in leadership.

God makes a very telling remark about Eli's leadership: *"Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?" (1 Samuel 2:29-36).* God puts it simply: 'You honour your sons above Me.' In so doing, Eli was truly honouring himself.

See, the one who refuses the confrontation, the difficulty and pain of leading other human beings by trying to remain on good terms with all of them is really supremely selfish. People mistakenly call him diplomatic and peaceful, when in fact, he may actually be selfishly protective of his own image. He hates conflict because it disturbs his own sense of peace, even if those around him are going to hell because of his protectiveness over his feeling of peace.

The abdicating leader will see those under him resent him for his passive nature. He will find his peace-keeping methods ultimately bring the reverse – a hostile anger from those who rightfully expected him to lead responsibly. The comfort he seeks will elude him as the fruit of his abdication eventually brings its bitter fruit – spiritual and emotional chaos.

Both the abusive leader and the abdicating leader are doing exactly the same thing – walking by the flesh – pleasing themselves rather than sacrificially leading others. One pleases himself by smothering the task of leading with selfish control, and the other pleases himself by avoiding the task of leading altogether. Neither one comes close to God's role for authority, be it as a husband, a parent, an elder, a manager or ruler in whatever sphere.

## **What is biblical, God-pleasing authority, and how do we accomplish it?**

### **1. Firstly, God-honouring authority is ruling in the fear of God.**

Hear the final words of Israel's greatest king, King David: *"He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain" (2 Samuel 23:3).*

Ruling in the fear of God. A God-fearing leader is the only leader that impresses God. What does this mean? It means anyone in authority understands that they themselves are under authority. They keep ever before them the fact that they are to be in submission to God. It is their submission to the Lordship of Christ that enables them to effectively serve as a chain in His authority.

See, Scripture is ever vigilant to remind leaders that they have a leader above them. To husbands, God says, *"Love your wives, as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25).* To managers and leaders, God says in **Ephesians 6:9**, *"And ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him."*

To pastors, God says: “nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Peter 5:3-4). See, the Bible is saying every leader must not lose sight of the fact that he is actually a representative of someone else’s authority.

Each leader is a conduit of God’s authority. He stands and rules only because God has given him permission. He is not a law unto himself, nor is he ruling for his own pleasure. He rules to accomplish the goals of the Master, the Husband, the Father, The King, The Shepherd. Realise, it is not enough to simply pass on the *commands* of the King, as a ruler in the fear of God – you are expected to pass on the *character* of the King as well. You are to lead as He does!

That’s a daunting thought. Husband, did you ever think that this means your role is to make sure your wife feels how Christ loves her, through you? Pastor, did you ever think that this means that the sheep are to feel how the Good Shepherd loves and feeds them, through you? Rulers, managers, did you ever think that your subordinates are meant to feel the wise direction and love of the Father, through you? That’s terribly humbling and daunting.

Thus, the true leader sees he is dependent on God – seeking to display and flesh out God’s care, love and leadership to the world. This requires a Spirit-filled life, one in submission to God. This is what it means to rule in the fear of God. You are to lead – not abdicate – but lead, realising you are in humble submission to God, and are actually seeking to be an ambassador of His leadership, not create your own.

## **2. Secondly, God-pleasing authority is sacrificial service for those you are leading.**

I was in a Christian bookstore and reflected on the fact that a shelf on the topic ‘leadership’ was packed with books, all obviously selling well. I wondered to myself if we will ever see a whole shelf devoted to books on servanthood, or if we could even find enough books written on the subject to fill a shelf.

See, we all want positions, we all aspire to leadership. But biblical, God-pleasing leadership does not rejoice in the leadership, but in the blossoming of those its leads. In other words, it rejoices in the task, not the title. Biblical leaders want to lead for a purpose, not for a position. Since they are concerned with the end result, not the honour of leading, they are servants.

They do not have to hang on to the title or defend the position, since they are convinced it is God-given. Instead, a God-honouring leader seeks to serve those he leads. God-pleasing leaders sacrifice their own pleasure and comfort for others. How topsy-turvy this notion is to the world’s idea of leadership! But it is the fundamental principle of leadership taught by our Lord:

*But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

## Mark 10:42-45

Jesus acknowledges that the unsaved rule by crushing, commanding and dominating each other. But He says among believers – which includes Christian families, churches and those who are saved and lead in other roles – this is not to be so. Instead, the greatest one is the one who serves.

What was the real-life illustration He gave of this? When all the disciples arrived for the final discourse by Jesus at the Last Supper, the Lord of Lords, the Ancient of Days, the Great I Am girded Himself and washed the grime and muck from the dusty and dirty feet of his twelve followers. Did He lose His position by doing so? No, He proved His authority to hold that position, for the humblest one deserves the greatest exaltation.

See, Christ is the ultimate leader. A God-honouring leader has this burden to bear: he knows he must continually put himself to death for those he leads, be it his wife, his children, his congregation, or his subordinates. Christ died for those He now rules. A leader is to be self-sacrificial. That is why a proud leader is a contradiction.

See, a sacrificial leader dies to self. A proud leader is protecting self. The man who refuses to say sorry, refuses to forgive, to reconcile, to make the first move, the one who cannot admit his wrongs or his faults or cannot apologise, is not dying to self – but protecting self. He is protecting his self-image. He is protecting his reputation. He is protecting his own sense of emotional comfort. He is protecting himself from being vulnerable and open.

That is why people lose confidence in him, because self-protection, even in the mundane, does not inspire confidence. It is the self-sacrificial leader that has people inspired to lead, for such a one walks the Calvary road.

In our twisted minds corrupted with pride, we think we must maintain awe and respect by false exteriors of strength and commanding authority, by making sure we do not lose favour with man by lowering ourselves. We think, we mustn't be too familiar with those we lead, or else we will break the sense of mystique that is supposed to surround our position. What nonsense. If the Alpha and Omega washed the feet of twelve dusty disciples, let us learn well:

*“You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I Am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his Master; nor is he who is sent greater than He who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”*

## John 13:13-17

A leader after God's heart can be summed up like this: he seeks to meet the needs of those he leads, at his own expense. Whether it takes his money or his image, whether it takes his time or his ego, whether it takes his resources or his sense of personal comfort – he gives it up so that those he leads will grow.

## What is biblical leadership?

Biblical leadership is what Peter meant when he says, *“Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you, be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5)*. Biblical, God-pleasing authority rules in the fear of God. It sees itself as simply a servant given the task of leading, knowing that any human leader is still accountable to another Leader: God.

Biblical authority wants to represent not only God’s laws, but God’s character – His leadership in every sense. It rules in the fear of God. It also sacrifices for those it is serving. Such leadership puts self to death – be it time, money, reputation, personal comfort, image, or honour, to see that those it leads become what they are meant to be. It is thrilled with the progress and development of those they lead, not with the title or position it holds.

Thus, a truly biblical leader is a God-pleaser, not a self-pleaser. For anyone in authority, when you seek to please yourself first, you will tend toward being abusive or abdicating. You will either rule for your own ends, by controlling, or refuse to rule at all, for your own ends. But if you place yourself under God, and die to self, you can be a God-fearing, God-pleasing leader, who is willing to lay down his life for those under him.

In Part 2 of this series, we examine biblical submission – what it is, and what it isn’t.