

# Authority

## Introduction

**Authority is defined as** the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior. Persons in command.

The most important earthly influence in a person's life is that which comes from his relationship with his parents. The newborn child enters life completely dependent upon, and completely subservient to, an all powerful authority, his mother and father. As a child grows, he adjusts continuously in his responses to that parental authority, for better or for worse depending on the training he receives. He also gradually becomes aware of other influences of authority in society; those of his schools, of the various levels of government and law enforcement, of the people for whom he works, of his church, and of the authority of God Himself.

As an adult, a person often has two roles simultaneously. He is not only subject to authority of various kinds all of his lifetime, but he may also himself be in a position of power and influence over others, perhaps as parent, military officer, executive, or judge. A person's ability to respond properly to authority, and his ability to exercise authority, depend on his orientation to divine principles of authority categorized in the Bible. As least three things are necessary to the proper response to authority. They are:

- Careful training by parents in correct standards of submission to authority
- A consistent daily walk with the Lord
- An ever growing categorical knowledge of Biblical principles of authority accompanied by personal acceptance of the teaching leading to personal application in the life.

When any of these factors is missing, a person will accept non Biblical, humanistic principles of leadership, or the response to leadership, with the usually bad results that derive from a poor understanding of scriptural standards.

This paper explores the subject of authority in several ways. First we examine the source of all spiritual and temporal authority, God the creator. The Bible is the textbook for the study. God has delegated authority to His Son, Jesus Christ, who, in turn, has passed certain leadership responsibilities to human beings, the apostles. The apostles retained this mantle of authority as they were given the divine enabling to write the word of God for believers to read and understand.

The next consideration in this discussion is the Biblical teaching on a variety of types of authority, including parental, governmental, and ecclesiastical authority. Finally, the paper will describe some ways in which children and young people can be trained in Biblical principles of authority and in the proper responses to and uses of leadership. There will be a few paragraphs in the final section about chain of command which is intended to show believers the mechanics of a proper relationship to both divine and human authority.

## THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIANITY

In all Christian activity some form of authority is exercised, either the authority of one individual over others, or the authority of an organization over individuals. The administration of leadership takes on so many varied forms that believers often become confused as to what constitutes legitimate Biblical authority. Some Christians in positions of leadership exercise Biblical principles of authority, others use human standards mixed with divine principles. Any Christian leader who is not well versed in the Biblical doctrines relating to authority is likely to use a combination of proper and improper authority.

All correct authority in Christian activity must derive from the Christian system itself: that is, a Christian leader must find his credentials of leadership in the word of God. Authority is of two kinds, primary and delegated authority.

Primary authority grows out of the relationship of those who have the right to command and those whose duty it is to obey. The basis of all primary authority in Christianity is the person of God. We are His; He made us. We are the creatures of His hand and the product of His intelligence. He is our maker, preserver and benefactor. He, therefore, has the absolute right to command; and it is our absolute duty to obey Him. God has seen fit only occasionally to govern man by His personal and primary authority. He usually delegates authority to others. He rules by His representatives.

Delegated authority is a right to command and enforce obedience which can be given to another by the party holding primary authority.

### **GOD'S PRIMARY AUTHORITY WAS DELEGATED TO THE LORD JESUS CHRIST**

The first delegation of authority in Christianity was from God the Father to God the Son. Hebrews 1:1-2a, "God, who gave to our forefathers many different glimpses of the truth in the words of the prophets, has now, at the end of the present age, given us the truth in the Son." Jesus said, "The word which you hear is not mine, but the Father's Who sent me." (John 12:49) "No man knows who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him." (John 14:6) Jesus closes His ministry on earth, and leads off His great commission to the apostles with the statement, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18)

The Son stands nearest the Father in delegated authority. He is the "brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person." (Hebrews 1:3) "It has pleased the Father than in Him should all fullness dwell." (Colossians 1:19) When the Father acknowledged Christ after His baptism, He said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) Christ was not only the delegate of God on earth, he is also the "image of the invisible God," (Colossians 1:15) and He said to His doubting disciples, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." (John 14:9)

There are several important inferences to be drawn from the concept of the authority of Jesus Christ. First, Jesus Christ is a manifestation of the power of God. Whether His power is seen in the material world or in the spiritual, our attention is arrested and our interest is challenged. God's power is part of life itself. It is the agency through which God's mind controls matter. It is the hand by which God's purpose takes form in the world.

There is a difference between power and force. Force startles and frightens us. Power, when directed by intelligent love, is always pleasing to us. There is force in a lightning bolt. It shatters the sky, can kill living beings, cleaves a tree in half, or burns a building to the ground. There is power when an intelligent mind uses electricity to drive a train or light a city. Jesus Christ, who is God himself, is a manifestation of the power of God, not of the force of God.

### **AUTHORITY PASSES TO THE APOSTLES**

#### **THE TRANSFER OF AUTHORITY TO THE APOSTLES**

As long as Jesus was on earth, He talked with men face to face. Men were directly under His command, and could claim His promises directly. But He has passed away from earth and does not rule anymore by His own direct authority. Just as the Father delegated His authority to the Son, so Jesus delegated His authority to the apostles.

In John 17 are the following statements:

- God gave the Son power over all flesh.
- This power was given that He might bestow eternal life on all men.
- Eternal life is bestowed through the knowledge of the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.
- God gave the Son certain men out of the world, that He might teach them all that God had given him.
- All men should believe on Christ through the word of the disciples.

In the transfer of authority from God the Father to the Son there was no danger of error or mistake. The Son, being divine, could receive without misunderstanding all that the Father communicated. But the apostles were human with all the weaknesses and imperfections of their humanity. There was danger, therefore, that they might not correctly understand or apprehend the communication which Christ made to them.

It became necessary, therefore, for some power or influence to be exerted on their minds to preserve them from error either in taking in or in giving out the lessons which they received. Therefore, Christ promised them the Holy Spirit, who was to guide them into all truth in the conveying of the gospel to the world.

1 Cor. 2:9-13, "Eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. Now, we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but in words which the Holy Spirit teaches."

#### THE APOSTLES' USE OF DELEGATED AUTHORITY

The Spirit guided apostles are the representatives of God on earth for the purpose of making known His will to the sons of men. Their teaching is Christ's teaching. Their authority is the authority of the Lord. "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." (John 20:21) So, when the apostles completed the revelation of the will of God in Jesus Christ, that revelation became the perfect law of liberty to which nothing could rightfully be added or taken away.

Anyone who teaches men to disobey the plain commandments of the apostles cannot be guided by the same Holy Spirit that inspired them to proclaim these commandments. The

same Holy Spirit which led an apostle to proclaim truth will not lead anyone else to ignore or to disobey that truth.

Any attempt to add to, or subtract from, the words of the apostles, or to substitute other teaching in the place of their teaching, is not of God. Satan had no opportunity to corrupt the truth as it proceeded from the Father to the Son, or from the Son to the apostles. But his opportunity arrived when the apostles began proclaiming the gospel to mankind as they preached. "Those by the wayside are they that hear; then cometh the devil and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." (Luke 8:12)

#### THE APOSTLES' EXERCISE OF JUDGMENT

The apostles are administering the authority of God even today, through the written word of God which they wrote under divine inspiration. They began administering that authority on the Day of Pentecost. Their first judgment was, "These men are not drunk as you suppose, but this is that spoken of by the prophet Joel..." (Acts 2:15-16) The world's judgment, that "these men are full of new wine", was wrong; the apostles' judgment was correct.

The apostles' second judgment was, "This same Jesus whom ye have taken with wicked hand and slain, God has raised up and made both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:23-24) Their third judgment was concerning convicted sinners, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto remission of sins." (Acts 2:38)

Thus, in all their sermons and writings they delivered judgments for spiritual Israel which stand as authoritative today as when first delivered. There is nothing that is essential to the well being of Christian believers that has not been a subject for the apostles' judgment. They are ambassadors of Christ. God acted through them and they represent Christ. "As though God did beseech you by us, we pray in Christ's place, be ye reconciled to God." (2 Cor. 5:20)

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

In Dr. G. A. Jacob's book, Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament, there are quotations worth repeating. This book is worth thoughtful reading, and it shows the trend among some modern Christian thinkers to get back to the principles of the apostles. From the book:

"The church of the apostolic period is the only church in which there is found an authority justly claiming the acknowledgment of Christian bodies in other times. Such authority is found in this church, not because it possessed a truer catholicity, or a purer constitution, or a more primitive antiquity than belong to succeeding ages, for neither antiquity, purity of form, or catholicity confers any right to govern or command; but because it was under the immediate rule and guidance of the apostles. It is their infallible judgment alone, as exhibited in this church, which has a legitimate claim to our submission. Of the church of no other period can the same be said, because the apostles had no successors to their office. They stand alone as the divinely inspired teachers, legislators, and rulers in Christ's church and kingdom. They stand alone as men appointed and commissioned by Christ Himself, and not by man."

"I appeal, therefore, from the Nicene Fathers to the apostles of Christ; from patristic literature to the New Testament; from ecclesiastical authority and practice of post apostolic centuries to the primitive church of the apostolic age. To go back to that time, and to endeavor, as far as possible, to reproduce the church of the New Testament, is most needful for us now, if we would preserve a faithful and distinct knowledge of Christian truth among our people. By realizing, as far as we may, the ideal of that church in our own community, we shall best maintain its liberty and purity, and we shall best meet the peculiar dangers of the present time and prepare for the future."

**FROM THE APOSTLES TO US - LINES OF AUTHORITY**

In the previous section, the transmission of divine authority to human beings is marked out in three phases: (1) God delegated all authority on earth to the Son, Jesus Christ; (2) the Son delegated teaching authority to the apostles; and (3) the apostles wrote authoritatively concerning the uses of and submission to authority on the part of believers of the church age.

Thus, every standard for the administration of authority over human beings by other people is derived from the teachings of the apostles as recorded in the Bible. The apostles wrote with the delegated power of God and were divinely inspired and controlled by the Holy Spirit of God, we are obliged to give absolute obedience to instructions from the Bible.

Three types of delegated authority are described in this section: (1) authority in human society; (2) ecclesiastical (local church) authority; and (3) parental authority. By careful study of the scripture passages related to these topics, a believer should be able to gain a great deal of discernment into the problems of proper response to authority.

AUTHORITY IN HUMAN SOCIETY

The teachings of the Bible indicate that established civil authority is to be obeyed explicitly except where such obedience would cause the believer to deviate from direct Bible teaching. That is to say, God does not delegate any authority that would allow someone to overrule His expressed commands or to compromise a divine principle. The statement of Christ, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21) bears out this principle.

BIBLE REFERENCES TO SPECIFIC TYPES OF AUTHORITY

- The authority of the rulers of federal, state, and local government: Rom. 12; 1 Tim. 2.
- The authority of a judge on the bench: 1 Cor. 6:1-8.

- The authority of a business owner or executive: Col. 3; Eph. 5; 1 Tim. 6.
- The authority of an athletic coach: 1 Cor. 9:24-27.
- The authority of the military chain of command: Matt. 8:8-10.

See the following passages also for references to the concept of authority in many areas of human society:

MATT. 22:19-21; 17:25-27

1 PET. 2:13-18

1 COR. 7:21-24

EPH. 6:5-9

1 TIM. 6:1, 2

DEUT. 17:12, 13

ROM. 13:1-7.

**CHRISTIAN LIFE PRINCIPLES RELATED TO AUTHORITY**

Submission to authority means doing the unpleasant thing as well as the pleasant. Therefore, there is a need for self discipline. Gal. 5:23 and 2 Thess. 3:8-15 point out that self control is a result of Christian growth. The entire book of Proverbs deals extensively with this issue. The believer can expect that as he grows in Christ his desire to be submissive to the Lord will grow, as will his ability to be a faithful servant.

A correct understanding of the concept of authority will cause a believer to gain respect for the privacy of others. He will learn that certain aspects of other people's lives do not fall under his jurisdiction. So he will be much less inclined to invade privacy, judge, malign, gossip, etc .

The correct use of Biblical principles of authority also develops in the believer a respect for other people's personal property. There are many passages in the Bible about stealing, covetousness, and the protection of property. Spiritual growth involves an acceptance of these principles as the believer better understands authority.

Respect for the rights of others to function in their own place under God's plan is a basic principle of authority. Other people have the right to make decisions without interference. Mature believers do not judge others, do not bully others into conforming, do not attempt to exercise authority which has not been delegated to them. "...to his own master he stands or falls..." (Romans 14:4)

**ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY**

Scripture references to local church authority are found in Titus 1:5-16; 2:15-3:2; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Matt. 16:16-19; 18:18, 19.

Spiritual leaders are not elected, hired or appointed. They emerge. As the child of God experiences the development of his spiritual gifts, these gifts are recognized by others in the body of Christ. He will be given a place in which to exercise his gifts.

In Acts 6:1-7, for example, it can be seen that the first deacons were recognized as spiritually minded and filled with the Holy Spirit. These attributes of personal character, the results of years of growth as believers, were evident in these men's lives. They emerged as leaders. The vote taken was merely an agreement that the majority of the local body recognized the mature lives of these men. There may have been others who coveted places of leadership. But such others were not recognized. The chosen deacons were selected to serve, not to be served. Nevertheless, in serving they did great works.

In becoming part of a local church, a Christian tacitly approves of the leadership structure of that church. By remaining with that congregation, he signifies that he accepts the pastoral teaching authority and the leadership of others in authority. The Bible commands submission to local church authority.

1 Peter 5:5, "Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble."

To submit means to recognize the chain of command and to refrain from undermining that authority. This is a command to all believers; and nearly all trouble in local churches comes from the violation of this principle. The troublemakers in a church are those who undermine authority by criticism, by conspiracies or by other methods. It is the duty of the pastor teacher to guard against this and to nip it in the bud. The early Christians willingly placed themselves under the leadership of the pastor and deacons because they were known to be ordained of God and that one could profit from their guidance and leadership.

**PARENTAL AUTHORITY - CHAIN OF COMMAND**

**Case Study No. 1**

A twenty-one year old girl returned home with an engagement ring and her boy friend in tow. After meeting and conversing with the young man, the parents told their daughter in private that they did not approve of her marrying this person at this time and that she should wait for a year or two. They stated their belief the marriage will not work and this fellow is not for you. The daughter argued that she felt that the Lord had brought them two of them together and that since they were both Christians it would be all right to marry right away.

What would be the correct answer in counseling with this young woman? Should she:

- (1) Go ahead with her marriage plans if she thinks it is the Lord's will for her, or
- (2) Follow her parents' wishes and wait until they give approval?

**Case Study No. 2**

An eighteen year old Christian young man announced to his unsaved father that the Lord had called him into the ministry and that he was thinking of going to Bible school to prepare for the pastorate. The father was strictly against such a move, and he advised his son to

enter university instead, to prepare for a vocation. He told his son that he should have a profession to fall back on in case he should fail in the ministry. He wanted his son to get his college degree first; then, if he still wanted to be a pastor, he could pursue that career.

What advice should be given to the son in this case? Should he:

- (1) Follow his father's wishes and enter the university, or
- (2) Follow his own desires and go to bible school?

**Case Study No. 3**

A teenage girl wanted to attend a certain Bible teaching church, but her mother refused to allow this. So the girl began to attend secretly as often as she could. Her mother found out and was very angry. She told her daughter that she should be at home attending to her chores around the house instead of spending so much time with those kids.

Should the teenage girl:

- (1) Continue to attend Bible sessions secretly in order to get good teaching, or
- (2) obey her mother's wishes?

The answer in all three cases above is: respect the parent's wishes! The following section describes the reasons for this answer.

**THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR A CHILD'S ABSOLUTE SUBMISSION**

The following commands from scripture indicate the extent to which God has committed Himself to working with children through their parents. Notice the spiritual condition and personality of the parent are not listed as conditions to obedience of these commands.

Eph. 6:1-3, "The right thing for you to do is to obey your parents as those whom the Lord has set over you. Honor your father and mother ... that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth."

Col. 3:20, "Obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing unto the Lord."

Prov. 6:20-23, "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother; bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck. When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou wakest, it shall talk with thee; for the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; the reproofs of instruction are the way of life."

THE FOCUS OF RESPONSE IS THE LORD, *NOT* THE PARENT

Part of God's purpose for placing parents in authority is to teach obedience to Himself. God is able to accomplish His purposes in our lives through those He places in authority over us, regardless of whether they are good leaders.

The Lord has beautiful and significant plans for those who love and respect Him (Mal. 3:16, 17). We will be His jewels; we will be treated as the sons of God. When a young person reacts against the tools of authority that God has placed in his life, he is reacting against God Himself. Severe warnings are given in the Bible about this.

Prov. 30:17, "The eye that mocketh at his father and despises to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it."

Heb. 12:5-6, ". . . My son, regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art reprov'd of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS IN IDENTIFYING GOD AS THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

In order to properly identify the hand of God in the authority which is exercised over us, several insights are necessary.

We must learn to differentiate between position and personality. One of the first objections to obeying authority is, "I can not respect the one I am supposed to obey." But it is possible to respect a person's position of authority while at the same time being aware of character deficiencies which need correction.

A teenager might say, "Why should I listen to my parents? They tell me not to do certain things, but they go out and do the same things themselves!" But this young person fails to distinguish between his parents' position and their character. The young man would be quick to see the error of his line of reasoning if his friend stated, "They other day I got stopped for speeding, but the policeman has such a bad personality that I tore up the ticket."

Some say, "My parents do not even try to understand me, so why should I listen to them?" Here again, there is a failure to distinguish between position and personality. It is more important that the young person understand what God is trying to accomplish than that his parents understand him. God knows that those He places in authority will have character deficiencies? But He is able to work in spite of these deficiencies.

Psalm 76:10, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; . . ."

Prov. 16:7, "When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him."

See also 1 Peter 2:18-20.

God can develop mature attitudes through His use of authority. He can use those who are the hardest to get along with to motivate us to develop mature attitudes. In each of the three case studies which are described above, the parent in authority detected an immature attitude on the part of the young person.

In Case Study No. 1, the marriage was disapproved because the parents detected underlying attitudes in both their daughter and her fiancé which would have made them incompatible in marriage. Each has a negative attitude of self will. Each expected to be the center of the stage. Neither had learned submission to authority. They had no concept of deference to one another or regard for the wishes of the other. Proper attitudes could be learned by the young people, if they would follow the advice to wait.

In Case Study No. 2, the father detected in his son attitudes of ungratefulness, stubbornness and insensitivity to the feelings of others. Even though he was not a believer, the father realized that these attitudes would cause his son to fail in the ministry. The fact that his father had some apprehension of his son's failure in the ministry should have been a significant warning to the son that he might be wrong.

In Case Study No. 3, the teenaged girl, by responding properly to her mother would allow her mother to see that her old attitudes had changed as a result of attending the church, and she would be advancing the most powerful argument for her mother to allow her to continue attending the church.

God's concern is that our attitudes become consistent with those of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus was subject to the authority of His parents as He was growing up. Because of this response, He grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and man. He "humbled himself and became obedient..." (Phil. 2:8)

DISCERNING BASIC INTENTIONS

The basic intentions of those in authority must be discerned. Daniel "purposed that he would not defile himself with the king's meat." (Daniel 1:8) Yet the authorities were not trying to make him violate his convictions; they were genuinely concerned about his appearance before the king. Daniel was in the right frame of mind to help the officer in charge work out a compromise.

In Case Study No. 1, the basic intentions of the parents who disapproved their daughter's marriage were not to restrict her happiness but rather to help her achieve a lasting happiness. They intended to pass on to her the insights and lessons which they had learned, sometimes the hard way. They intended for her to avoid a lot of future complications which they knew would occur if she made the wrong choice in marriage. They intended to derive pleasure and joy from their daughter's happy marriage.

In Case Study No. 2, the basic intention of the father for the son was not to talk him out of the ministry but to provide him with the tools for being successful in life. He intended to use the boy's college education to build mature attitudes in his son. He wanted to be proud of his son's achievements. He intended to rest in the fact that his son was building security in his vocation. He intended that his son be grateful and appreciative for what he had done for him. He intended to keep a channel of communication open so that his son would be responsive in the future.

In Case Study No. 3, the basic intentions of the teenage girl's mother were not to stop the girl from going to church, but to develop obedience toward her parents. This obedience involved assuming responsibilities around the house rather than running off all the time. The mother observed that some of her daughter's friends were not obeying their parents and often condemned their parents for not being spiritual. She did not want her daughter to develop these attitudes and practices.

DEVELOPING CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES

Creative alternatives can be developed. Mature attitudes, along with insight into basic intentions, prepare the way for the development of creative alternatives or compromises. Daniel worked out an alternative which would not violate his moral convictions. As you read the study in the book of Daniel, notice the respect, the creativity and the careful choice of wording in Daniel's request. He asked to be given a chance to show he was right; but he expressed his willingness to obey the officer in any case.

Alternatives for the girl who wanted to get married

- Discuss with her parents the qualities she should look for in a husband.
- Give her parents ample opportunity to become acquainted with the boyfriend before there was any discussion of marriage.



- Ask her parents to point out areas where both she and her boyfriend could improve.
- Request that her parents set up guidelines to help her discern whether she has met the right life partner.
- Be willing to show deference to her parents on the timing of the marriage.

Alternatives for the young man who wanted to go into the ministry

- Accept the challenge of motivating new spiritual interest in his father. This is the best preparation he could have for the ministry since this is one of the most important functions of the ministry.
- Work out with his father and his minister areas of training at the university which would be useful in both the ministry and in another vocation.
- Develop a personal program of Bible study while at the university; and use the university experience as an opportunity for a ministry with students.

Alternatives for the teenage girl

- Ask forgiveness for her past attitudes and actions which were wrong.

- Commit her mother to the Lord prior to her request to attend the youth group, understanding that the Lord would be speaking through her mother.
- Determine ahead of time that she would silently thank the Lord for whatever answer her mother gave, and continue to develop right attitudes in the home.

THE RESULTS OF OBEDIENCE TO PARENTS

It is always right to obey God, even when that obedience interrupts or disturbs our plans. Obedience to parents is one of the most essential habits for young people to learn; and parents should insist on obedience from the time their children are babies. A great deal of rebellion can be prevented by parents using Biblical principles in training their children. See Exo. 21:15-17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 21:18-21; Matt. 15:3-6.

Divine discipline and other unpleasant results of rebellion are totally avoidable. The great inner peace, the happiness, the wonderful blessings of living the plan of God for the life are unmistakably the greatest experiences a person can have.