

# The Source Of All Authority

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## Questions about authority are common

Authority is a right—the right to decide or to take action in a given situation.

I was told that one of our children once said to a babysitter, "You have no right to boss me! You're not my mother!" *Did* the babysitter have the right to tell the child what to do? If so, where did she get that right? And what were the limitations on that right? The issue was one of authority: Who had the right to decide what in that particular situation?

Leon Jaworski, government prosecutor in the Watergate affair, pointed out in his book *The Right and the Power* that the central question in Watergate was also one of authority: What are the rights belonging to the president of the United States, and what are the limits of his authority? From babysitting to running the national government, issues of authority pervade our lives, and often create tension.

One important aspect of this subject today has to do with interpreting what the Bible means when it says the husband is the head of the wife. Does that mean he has final authority? If so, where did he get it? What are its limits? How is it to be exercised?

Authority was also an issue in Jesus' time. In Luke 20:1–8 we read about religious leaders coming to Jesus and saying, "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?" Jesus was a spiritual leader but he was not a part of their religious hierarchy. They wanted to know how he got the right to do what he was doing.

The issue of authority is even bigger still. Satan took Jesus up on a mountain "and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it *has been given to me*, and I can give it to anyone I want to'" (Luke 4:5–6). But we know that Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth *has been given to me*." Satan said a authority belonged to him. But Jesus said it belonged to him.—There we have another question of authority, a conflict we see throughout the Bible—Christ against the devil, the spirit against the flesh.

Ultimately we must all give account to God for how we responded to authority and for how we exercised it.

## Authority is a fact

Before going on, I want to make a basic assertion: We live in an ordered universe in which there is authority and submission to authority. That's the way things are. It's a fact we should learn to live with. If we do, we experience harmony and peace. If we try to go against it, we have conflict and catastrophe.

This is true in our everyday lives. Someone who drives the wrong way down an exit ramp onto a freeway is in extreme danger, because he violates the laws established by those with authority to make those laws. When we work against the fact of authority, we place ourselves in danger.

## **God is the source of all authority**

All authority comes from God. "There is no authority except that which God has established" (Romans 13:1).

The infinite, personal God in heaven is sovereign in his universe. He has the right—the authority—to do whatever he wants. And he not only has this right, but he also has the power to do what he wants. This is the truth King Nebuchadnezzar recognized about God in Daniel 4:35.

He does as he pleases

with the powers of heaven

and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand

or say to him: "What have you done?"

In the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13), some Bible translations indicate that the closing line—"for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever"—is not in the earliest known manuscripts. But I think whoever added these words must have been inspired. The kingdom is God's—he has the right to do whatever he wants in the universe he made. The power is his—he has the ability to do whatever he wants. And the glory is his—the same glory reflected in the beautiful character personified in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Some have said authority comes from the ownership of property. Others say it comes from the government. Others come closer and say it is in the nature of man. But the truth is that all authority comes from God.

God has delegated authority to others. First of all, he has delegated authority to Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 3:22, Peter wrote that Christ "has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him." God put Christ over these other authorities.

After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus said, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am" (John 13:13). He is our Teacher, and we dare not disagree with him; he is our Lord, and we dare not disobey him. We are under his authority, the authority given him by his Father. A Christian is someone who has placed himself under this authority by surrendering his life to Christ.

God has also granted authority to angels and Satan, and also to man. In Genesis 1:28 God told mankind to "fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." He placed Adam in the garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it" and let Adam name all the animals. He gave man responsibilities and the right to take action. He delegated authority to man.

## **God's system of authority as it relates to mankind**

As stated earlier, we live in an ordered universe in which there is authority and submission to authority. In the Bible we find seven authority-submission relationships that involve mankind.

The first is *God and man*. A command that relates to this is James 4:7-"Submit yourselves, then, to God."

The second is *man and nature*, as we see in Genesis 1:28. Man is to have dominion over the earth.

The third is *husband and wife*. "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" ( Ephesians,5:22–23). There is, as you know, a lot of static about this today, and by and large I don't blame many people for the static they're either raising or getting. There are some gross distortions and misconceptions of what the Bible teaches on this subject. But I hope we can clear up any confusion you may have about authority in the home as we look into the general topic of biblical authority and submission.

The fourth relationship is that of *parents and children*. We like our children to know the command in Ephesians 6:1-"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" I recall how one of our children memorized this verse while still very young, and regularly recited it. But one day he asked me, "Daddy, what are parents?" I thought I had really been getting somewhere.

A fifth authority-submission relationship is that of *governors and the governed*. Peter wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right" (1 Peter 2:13–14).

The sixth is that of *employers and employees*. Passages such as Ephesians 6:5–9, Colossians 3:22- Colossians 4:1, and 1 Peter 2:18–20 refer specifically to slaves, but the principles also hold today for us in our work.

The seventh relationship is that of *spiritual leaders and the spiritually led*. Hebrews 13:17 concerns this relationship: "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."

These seven biblical authority-submission relationships are evidence that we live in an ordered universe in which authority and submission to authority are established. These relationships may be abused, but they are there, and their source is God. He has delegated authority, and along with this authority come responsibility and accountability.

Every person is involved in more than one authority-submission relationship. You are under God's authority, of course, and you also share in mankind's authority over the earth. You may be a husband or wife. You may be someone's parent. You are under the government's authority, and you may also be an employer or an employee. You have spiritual leaders over you, and you may also be a spiritual leader yourself.

### **God has given us guidelines**

We have clear scriptural guidelines that apply to each of these relationships. They tell us what to do, whether the relationship is voluntary-such as with the spouse you have chosen to marry or with the employer you have agreed to work for or involuntary. Children have an obligation to obey their parents even though they did not choose to be born in that family. We are obligated to submit to the government's authority whether or not we voted for those in power.

The scriptural guidelines relating to these relationships are not always extensive. What God has to say about raising children, for example, isn't very much. But what the Bible *does* say about this is central and fundamental.

The biblical guidelines concerning these seven relationships are true for any person anywhere, at any time, in whatever culture, and whether or not the person is a Christian. They are not arbitrary rules God made up; they reflect the way things really are.

Take the Ten Commandments, for example. These are expressions of God's character, and they are written into the constitution of every human being. As someone has said, you don't break the Ten Commandments; they break you. When you violate them, you come apart. Anyone who violates them, Christian or not will face conflict and catastrophe.

### **The choices we make**

Since each of us is involved in more than one of these authority-submission relationships, we are constantly making choices each day as to which authority we should obey at this moment. For example, suppose a wife is driving and her husband tells her to speed up to seventy miles an hour, though the speed limit is fifty-five. She must make a choice. If she obeys her husband, she disobeys the government, which sets the speed limit. If she obeys the law, she disobeys her husband.

We're all making choices like this constantly, and each of us is accountable to God for the choices we make. He will judge us not only according to what we choose, but also according to the attitude with which we carry out our choices.

Perhaps you've heard of Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist in Germany who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. He later wrote that what helped him survive this ordeal was knowing that no one could take away from him the ultimate freedom to choose his attitude toward the people and circumstances around him. He chose to have hope and assurance, and this brought him through.

We also have the freedom to choose our attitudes in the authority-submission relationships in which God has placed us—attitudes toward God himself, his creation, our husband or wife, our children, our parents, the government, those we work for and those who work for us, and those who lead us spiritually and those whom we lead.

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**On Your Own:**

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## Authority &amp; Submission

1. Why do you believe God has final and total authority in your life?
2. What observations about true authority can you make from the centurion's words in Matthew 8:8–9?
3. In what ways can you see God's authority clearly demonstrated in our world today?
4. How would you summarize what you know about the authority Jesus Christ has?
5. What was the purpose of the authority God gave to Christ according to John 17:2?
6. Do you agree that *submission* means *surrender*? Explain your answer.
7. In what ways do you feel that submitting to various authorities in your life is part of your service to God?

Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Savior am happy and blest,  
Watching and waiting, looking above,  
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

Fanny J. Crosby  
"Blessed Assurance"

8. In Hebrews 5:7–9, what do you learn from the example of Jesus Christ's submission?

9. List all the persons you know who have legitimate authority in some area of your life.
10. In what possible ways have you ever exercised authority illegitimately?
11. List all the areas in which you have legitimate authority over other people.
12. Do you have more authority than you had two years ago? If so, do you think this reflects growth in your character? Explain your answer.
13. Who are the people you are accountable to for the way in which you exercise authority in certain areas?
14. Read Matthew 7:28–29. Should this impression of Jesus' teaching be true also of Christian leaders and teachers today? Why or why not?
15. What do you learn in these passages about spiritual leadership?
- 1 Corinthians 16:15–16
- 2 Corinthians 7:2–7
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13
- 1 Timothy 4:12
- [Hebrews 13:7](#)

An important passage about spiritual authority and submission is 1 Peter 5:1–7. Read this passage carefully to answer questions 16–21.

16. In 1 Peter 5:2, Peter says spiritual leaders should serve as "overseers." What does this mean?

17. Of the proper attitudes in spiritual leadership mentioned in the last part of verse [2](#) and verse [3](#) in 1 Peter 5, which do you think are the most difficult for you to carry out in your own leadership, and why?

18. What is the "crown of glory" referred to in 1 Peter 5:4, and why do you think it is mentioned here following these verses about spiritual leadership?

19. What do you think is the relationship between submissiveness and humility?

20. Should spiritual *leaders* also have the attitude of submission and humility mentioned in 1 Peter 5:5–6? Why or why not?

When a man, in virtue of an official position in the Church, demands the obedience of another, irrespective of the latter's reason and conscience, this is the spirit of tyranny. When, on the other hand, by the exercise of tact and sympathy, by prayer, spiritual power and sound wisdom, one Christian worker is able to influence and enlighten another, so that the latter, through the medium of his own reason and conscience, is led to alter one course and adopt another, this is true spiritual leadership.

D. E. Hostein  
"Insight of a Seer"

21. What do you think are the most important applications that 1 Peter 5:1–7 can have for a married couple who are trying to carry out their spiritual responsibilities as husband and wife?

What applications can this passage have for parents?

22. How do you think the authority of the Bible itself is related to the issues discussed in these articles?