



# SUBMITTING TO AUTHORITY

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There are many things within Christianity that our culture would applaud. Character, honesty, deep relationships, and commitment to unity across racial boundaries, all get positive marks from non-Christians. Submission is a different story, though. If you are like most people in our culture, even the word brings a subtle but defiant clench deep in the pit of your stomach. It is a pity that the topic of submission is often discussed only in the context of marriage, because the problem in our culture is not that wives do not want to submit to husbands, but that no one wants to submit to anyone. The Bible has much to say about submission: to God (James 4:6-7), to political authorities (Romans 13:1-7), to church leadership (Heb 13:17), within marriage (Col 3:18), and even a general submissiveness of all Christians to one another (Eph 5:21).

How do Christians act in these other relationships where we are supposed to be submissive? When it comes to being submissive to church leadership, we're quite bad at it. So bad in fact, that there are now THOUSANDS of different denominations. Do we really believe that all of those splits were justified? On the personal level, how many of us are quick to switch churches because of relatively minor issues. Instead of praying for our Christian leaders, many of us spend more time complaining about them. Instead of submitting to them, we ignore or even oppose their instructions.

How do we treat those in political authority over us? The Bible is not difficult to decipher on this issue: "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 ... Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then

revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Rom 13:1,7). Remember, these words were written in a society where most people had little or no say over who their leaders were. And many of those leaders persecuted Christians. They jailed, enslaved, tortured, and killed Christians. We have freedom and safety on a level that first century Christians could barely dream of. And yet, if someone gets elected that we disagree with, many of us treat them with massive disrespect. During election season, one very effective way to win is for the candidates to slander each other, to exaggerate the others flaws, and even to tell bold-faced lies. Even we as Christians tend to reward this behavior. We ought to pray more for our political leaders, and complain about them far less.



Before we go any further, it seems wise to discuss what submission is and isn't:

- *Submission* to human authority does not mean that we are never involved in the decision making process. In fact, respectfully communicating with our leaders about issues is an important part of the American political process.
- *Submission* does not mean that we follow human authority when it clearly involves sin. Just as the early disciples had to ignore the religious establishment's



command to stop teaching about Jesus (Acts 6:27-32), there are times when following God requires rejecting sinful instructions by human authority.

- *Submission* does not mean that those who submit are less important, less intelligent, or less godly than those to whom we are told to submit. Even Jesus was submissive to the plans of God the Father, “Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-9 NIV; see also Luke 22:39-44)

- *Submission* does mean that we have a strong tendency to defer to the judgement of the authority unless it involves obvious sin before God.

- In relationships where we are told to *submit*, the authority involved will have to answer to God for how they used their authority. (Hebrews 13:17)

The only absolute command to submit, is when we are commanded to submit to God “... God is opposed to the Proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit therefore to God...” (James 4:6-7 NASB). However, many of our lives look more like the concluding verse of Judges, “...everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25 NASB) Submission to God is the cornerstone response that is needed in all of our lives before we can meaningfully address other issues. Why would someone submit to their pastor, if they wouldn’t submit to God? How can we expect Christians to be submissive towards political authorities, if they ignore God on issues like sexuality, materialism, greed, and pride?

One widely forgotten area of submission is the general submission of all Christians to one another. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). This is not just contained within marriage relationships, but every Christian friendship or relationship of any kind ought to contain an aspect of mutual submissiveness. Simply put, we don’t always need to do things our way. We should always consider the well being and desires of other Christians in every decision that affects them or our relationship with them. This mutual submissiveness can take many different forms. Even your Pastor is called to be “submissive” in these “one another” relationships. Pastors are still called to have spiritual authority; but just as Jesus came to serve others, those in spiritual authority are called to serve, not to lord their

authority over others.

Finally, we reach the topic of marriage. If all of these other teachings on submission were meaningfully embraced by Christians, the topic of submission within marriage would quickly become a much more minor issue. “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... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (Eph 5:22-33 NIV). The relationship between husband and wife is compared to the relationship between Christ and the church. How did Christ love the church? Christ loved the church unconditionally, sacrificially, selflessly, and He suffered to the point of death for the church. That is the example that Christianity gives for husbands. Wives are called to respectfully submit to their husband’s servant leadership, just as the church is called to follow Christ.

We all have a lot we can learn about submission. Submission can be a very hard thing. When Jesus prayed for an alternative to the cross (Luke 22:39-44), he wanted another way so badly that he actually sweat blood. But, He chose to follow the Father’s plan even when it was hard. All of us should be incredibly grateful that He did. But while submission can be hard, the plans of our heavenly Father always have our best in mind and they result in immense blessings. As a result of Jesus’ obedience, the Bible tells us that, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11 NIV).



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