

# A Bible Study on Spiritual Authority

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**Introduction:** This is a four-part study on the Biblical nature of authority as it relates to spiritual leadership:

- A partial list of verses from the New Testament on the subject of authority
- The meaning of the Greek word(s) for authority as used in the New Testament
- Some comments on the nature of spiritual authority
- The function of spiritual authority as it relates to elderships and leadership teams

## I. A Partial List of Verses From the New Testament on the Subject of Authority

The following scriptures on authority use the word to mean the right and responsibility to exercise influence in people's lives by virtue of godly character, experience, and fulfillment of a God-given calling or ministry:

Matt. 7:29 "... for He taught them as one having **authority**, and not as their scribes."

Matt. 21:23 "When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as He was teaching, and said, 'By what **authority** are you doing these things, and who gave you this **authority**?'"

Matt. 28:18 "And Jesus came and said to them, "All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

1 Cor. 9:8 "Do I say this on human **authority**? Does not the law also say the same?"

2 Cor. 10:8 "Now, even if I boast a little too much of our **authority**, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it."

2 Cor. 11:17 "What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's **authority**, but as a fool;"

2 Cor. 13:10 "So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the **authority** that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down."

1 Thess. 4:8 "Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human **authority** but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you."

Titus 2:15 Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all **authority**. Let no one look down on you."

1 Pet. 5:5 "In the same way, you who are younger must accept the **authority** of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

2 Pet. 2:10 "...especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise **authority**. Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones..."

3 John 9 "I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our **authority**. "

Jude 8 "Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject **authority**, and slander the glorious ones."

Rev. 11:3 "And I will grant my two witnesses **authority** to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth."

Rev. 18:1 "After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great **authority**; and the earth was made bright with his splendor."

Rev. 20:4 "Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given **authority** to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

## II. The Meaning of the Greek Words For Authority as Used in the New Testament

"Authority" when used as a noun, comes from *exousia*, which is derived from the verb *exesti*, which means, "it is lawful." The most basic meaning of the word, then, means a derived or delegated right. It can also mean, depending on the context, permission to do something, liberty, the ability one has to perform or accomplish something, or the right to exercise power.

Other words that are translated "authority:"

- *Epitage* - Injunction or commandment. See Titus 2:15
- *Huperoche* - A projection of eminence, as a mountain peak, therefore, pre-eminence, superiority, or excellence. See I Timothy 2:2 translated, "high place" as of the position of magistrates. In I Corinthians 2:1 this word is translated "excellence" as in speech.
- *Dunastes* - Close to *dunamis*, or power. Signifies dynasty, potentate, high and powerful officer. See Acts 8:27, Luke 1:52, I Timothy 6:15.
- *Authenteo* - From *auto* (self) and *hentes*, probably signifying to authenticate. Thus, to exercise authority on one's own account, to domineer over. In earlier usage of this word it signified one who killed another person with their own hand, or who took their own life with their own hand. See I Timothy 2:12.

The word authority, when derived from *exousia*, emphasizes the right, more than the power, to do something. There are two basic forms of this right to exercise authority:

- Intrinsic authority, which has to do with moral authority. This authority is derived from one's own person by virtue of the person's character.
- Delegated authority, that is, authority given to a person from another source.

Since "there is no authority except from God" (Romans 13:1, speaking of the right of magistrates to exercise authority over others), we may deduct from this verse the principle that every kind of

authority, other than God Himself, is derived or delegated authority, and therefore secondary to God. Even moral authority is derived from being created in God's image.

One other kind of authority that takes supremacy over human authority, is the Bible. Because it is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21), it has divine authority. The Bible was given by God with the intention that we submit to it and obey it, not look to it as one more influence in our lives.

Christians have been given various kinds of authority. These include the authority of a believer to cast out demons (Mk. 3:15), the authority of parents to instruct their children and command their obedience (Eph. 6:1, 1 Tim. 3:4), and the authority of church leaders (see scriptures listed above).

Each kind of derived or delegated authority has certain conditions and qualifications in order for it to be exercised properly. The Scriptures are careful to distinguish between spiritual authority and the authority of magistrates. The authority that Paul speaks about in Romans 13 is the *right* and power to enforce obedience, but the authority Peter speaks about in 1 Peter 5 is the *responsibility* to serve God's people for God's purposes in God's ways.

Below is a list of scriptures that make it clear that spiritual leaders have been given authority to lead, albeit, with certain conditions and restrictions:

1 Pet. 5:1-5 Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to **tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight**, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. **Do not lord it over those in your charge**, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, **you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders**. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

1Tim. 5:17 Let the elders who **rule well** be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching;

Titus 1:5 I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that **you should put in order what remained to be done**, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you:

Acts 20:28-30 **Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers**, to shepherd the church of God that He obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore **be alert**, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.

1Thess. 5:12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and **have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you**; esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Heb. 13:17 **Obey your leaders and submit to them...** Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

2 Tim. 4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim **the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.**

2 Tim. 2:24 And **the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.** God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth

### III. Some Comments on the Nature of Spiritual Authority

It is clear from these passages and from others that there is a *delegated* authority to those who are called and gifted by God to lead the church, but that authority can only be exercised properly to the degree there is *derived* authority to carry it out in a Christlike manner. In other words, spiritual authority is delegated by God, but derived through godliness.

So the real question on spiritual authority is not does it exist, but how is it to be exercised? That, in turn, depends on how one defines "spiritual authority." Jesus made it abundantly clear that what He meant by authority was influencing the flock through serving it. The only right use of spiritual authority is to serve others: "Let...he who governs be as one who serves" (Luke 22:26-27).

In this sense, authority is defined as the right to influence others. Jesus went to great lengths to re-define the meaning of that authority, both in word and deed. But how do we know if we are exercising spiritual authority in a Christlike way? The following seven tests may help:

- Does it restrict or does it liberate?
- Does it lead to conformity or does it promote creativity?
- Does it bring dependence on man or on God?
- Does it produce servility or servanthood?
- Does it depend on law or grace?
- Does it destroy or build a person's confidence?
- Does it produce fear of touching God's anointed, or does it equip people to function with confidence in their gifts as priests and kings before God?

There are three dimensions of spiritual authority. By looking at the practical outworking of spiritual authority, we get a better feel of what authority is, and just as important, what it is not. Those three dimensions are:

- The *mark* of spiritual authority is Christlikeness. Spiritual authority is not taken, just offered. Once you try to force people to do or believe something, i.e. to enforce your right to influence them, you are no longer exercising spiritual authority, but operating in the flesh. Jesus came 2,000 years ago as a suffering servant. He came to win the hearts of people by serving them, and ultimately dying for them. Spiritual leaders in His church are commanded to do the same. Mark 9:35 "He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"

Spiritual authority includes persuasion. Paul is a good example of someone who employed every means possible to convince the churches he planted to do what he felt was right. He pleaded, cajoled, warned, and pressured, all to touch the hearts of God's people and move them to obedience to the Lord. 2 Cor. 5:11 "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others..."

- The **mandate** of spiritual authority is to lead. While I am concerned about the style of leadership, I want to be clear that it is leadership I am calling for. It is going in front. It is making decisions and persuading others to make decisions.

The exercise of spiritual authority differs according to the gifts a person has been given. The spiritual authority of a teacher flows from right use of the Scriptures to persuade and convince, whereas the prophet warns about sin in people's lives and reveals the heart of God. Apostolic authority is derived from the faith and vision one has of the glory of God among the Gentiles and one's role as a spiritual parent to those who come to Christ through their ministry.

It is vital to note that when Paul appeals to his authority as an apostle in correcting the saints in Corinth and Galatia, he is not thinking institutionally or positionally, but relationally. The apostolic networks and chains of command we see in the body of Christ today tend to operate in a manner that is completely foreign to what Paul had in mind when he spoke of his apostolic authority. Paul appealed to his authority to see new Christians free from the control of false teachers, and to preserve the truth of gospel, not to establish a network of churches that reported to him at the top. He was concerned about the believers being brought under the influence of false doctrine. There is no scriptural evidence that Paul set up a movement of churches with himself in charge as the "ruling apostle".

- The **ministry** of those given spiritual authority is three-fold:

a. Guard the flock:

- against wolves from within - Acts 20:28-30
- against false doctrine – 2 Timothy 4:1-5
- against deceivers - 2 John 7-11
- against those who cause divisions - Romans 16:17- 18, Titus 3:10
- against immorality - 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

b. Govern the flock:

- By tending the flock - 1Pet. 5:1-5 "Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to *tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight*, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it —not for sordid gain but eagerly. *Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.*"
- By correcting the flock - 2 Tim. 2:24 "And *the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness*. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth"
- By bringing order to the flock - Titus 1:5 "I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that *you should put in order what remained to be done*, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you"  
1 Timothy 3:15 You know how the church ought to conduct itself

- By making decisions that affect the flock - 1Tim. 5:17 "Let the elders who *rule well* be considered worthy of double honor..."  
Acts 15:13-22 "James spoke up: brothers, listen to me, it is my judgment...then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided..."

c. Guide the flock.

- By teaching from the Word – 1 Timothy 4:11 "Command and teach these things"  
2Tim. 4:1 "I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."  
John 3:34 "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God."  
1Tim. 3:2 "Now an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..."
- By equipping and preparing others for the work of ministry - 2Tim. 2:2 "And what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well."  
Eph. 4:11 "The gifts He gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..."  
Eph. 4:12 "To prepare God's people for works of service."
- By imparting passion to others - Romans 15:20,30,16:26 "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not known...I urge you, brothers...to join me in my struggle...so that all nations might believe and obey him - to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Cynicism, disrespect and disorder characterize this present evil age. It is not surprising, therefore, to find within the church a hunger for fresh understanding concerning the nature of spiritual authority and obedience. Tom Marshall once said, "We live in freedom only within the constraints of divine order in all of our relationships."

Some teachers and leaders in the Body of Christ so gravely misunderstand and misrepresent the issues of authority and obedience that we need to think very carefully about the Biblical issues and principles involved. In the flesh people seek to avoid personal responsibility, pushing the responsibility for decisions up to a leader. The leader, also in the flesh, is all too eager to take responsibility that is not his or hers to take.

The Bible makes it clear that obedience merely for the sake obedience is not necessarily good. We can obey evil as well as good; we can obey man when we ought to obey God. Obedience that produces conformity is not healthy. Obedience to gain acceptance feeds the flesh. It is therefore of great importance that we distinguish between true spiritual authority and the abuse of authority.

It was Tom Marshall that taught about three different kinds of authority and the obedience that is appropriate to each one:

- 1. Task authority**
- 2. Teaching authority**
- 3. Spiritual authority**

Authority is to be exercised differently in each of these categories. Many of the problems in the church arise from using a type of authority and expecting a kind of response that is inappropriate to the situation.

**Task authority** is the simplest and easiest to understand. This kind of authority concerns a job that is to be done. A person is put in charge that gives assignments and direction; under him or her is a team whose responsibility it is to comply as promptly and efficiently as they can with the leader's instructions. It may or may not be appropriate to be "creative," take individual ownership, or discuss the pros and cons of certain approaches to the tasks to be done.

In certain circumstances task authority is a legitimate and effective form of leadership. It turns a group of individuals into a single operating unit and allows work to be done efficiently. The New Testament uses the Greek word *peitharcho* (to obey a chief or ruler) to describe the obedience that is appropriate in response to leaders in such situations (Titus 3:1). This word is also used to describe the kind of obedience we are to give to magistrates (Romans 13:1), and the obedience to God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

When we turn to **teaching** authority, the purpose is much more than simply accomplishing a task. It is not so much something that is to be done, but truth to be learned. What is of greatest importance is that the one learning has the opportunity to discover how to learn for himself, so that after he has learned he will no longer need detailed instructions. In these situations, unlike the task situation, questions and answers, reasons, explanations and dealing with objections and misunderstandings are all part of the learning process. Thus the Bible uses the Greek word *peitho* (to be persuaded) to describe the kind of obedience God is looking for. He wants obedience with understanding, from the heart. When the writer to the Hebrews says, "obey your leaders" (Hebrews 13:17), *peitho* is the word he uses.

Teaching authority is persuasion authority. We are to convince others by appealing to the Word, with the aim that the person being taught has revelation for him or herself of the truth being expounded. Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:11 "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to **persuade** others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences."

Teaching authority in the church is often confused with task authority. The pastor or leader who balks at being asked such legitimate questions as "Why?" or "What for?" needs to understand the difference between the two types of authority and the obedience God expects to each. Applying task authority to teaching situations will not produce true learning; the believers will not really understand but just repeat a lesson or truth like a parrot.

A good teacher will never be content with rote learning; he understands the severe limitations on those who do not truly understand the truths being presented. Some of those being taught may not want to grapple with the truths of God's Word; others may not want to make the changes it demands in their lives, but we must not lapse into a task authority approach when teaching the Word of God. It may seem easier, but in the end it does not solve problems, it creates them.

When it comes to the exercise of **spiritual authority**, the aim again is different. The aim is not compliance or blind obedience, but motivation from one's heart to take ownership of what God is doing or saying in a particular situation. The purpose of spiritual authority is to serve people, equip them, and influence them to become who God wants them to be.

The essence of Christian maturity is the free response of the will to truth and the will of God as one seeks for and receives revelation to his or her own heart. The witness of the truth to a person's heart

is vital. If I alter my behavior or try to develop my character for any other reason than a loving response to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in my heart, it is not obedience that is pleasing to God.

Thus, the word used for this type of obedience is different again; it is *hupakouo*, "to listen under." The hearing and obeying both come from under the surface, from deep within the heart. The spiritual leader may be a channel of God's Spirit motivating a person, but they are not the only channel, and they are not assigned by God to control what channels He uses in people's lives.

Task authority and teaching authority can both be deadly if applied to a situation that calls for a person to seek for and find what God wants for themselves. The exercise of spiritual authority in relation to *hupakouo* obedience should be aimed at leading a person to self-discovery of the will of God. We should not order them as if it were a task they should do, nor should we spoon feed them as if they cannot study the Word or listen to the Spirit for themselves.

The right exercise of spiritual authority calls upon leaders in the church to trust the precious Holy Spirit to work in people's hearts. He is more committed to their obedience and growth than the leaders could ever be.

#### **IV. The Practical Outworking of Spiritual Authority on Leadership Teams/Elderships**

How does authority work on leadership teams, where there is a plurality of spiritual gifts? Because the nature of spiritual authority is to serve, it requires humility to recognize and receive what has been given by God to others, and receive those persons as gifts from the Lord. If God has given a person the spiritual gift of leadership, and if He calls him to give oversight to a leadership team/eldership, then it requires humility both in him to offer that gift, and in others to receive it. Authority, in that context, is the call of God to lead the team with the vision, wisdom, values, perspective, etc., that God has deposited in that person.

Authority is delegated to the person called to lead, and is derived through their obedience to God. By leading, the person who is the "senior amongst equals" is offering to serve others with the gifts God has given to them. Each person on an eldership has been given spiritual gifts that result in ministry to the body, and to the others on the eldership.

Each person on the eldership has something unique to contribute, each one has been gifted by God, and when He brings a group of people together, they are to honor those gifts and callings of their co-workers, and submit to them.

That includes the one chosen by God to be a senior amongst equals. God's normal pattern is to anoint one person to lead out, to be the senior on the team. That person plays the role of helmsman, like a captain on a ship. The analogy of a ship is a good one, because one person cannot single-handedly navigate, engineer, set the sails, and clean the decks for an entire ship. It requires a team effort. The role of each person is vital for the ship to be kept in tip-top condition and to reach its destination.

The role of the helmsman is an important one, but no more important than anyone else in terms of value or function. And though each person has equal value, not every person has equal responsibility or authority. It is the helmsman, the captain, who brings the crew together, makes sure each person on the crew is prepared to take up their responsibilities in sailing the ship, and helps chart the course they are to sail.

God has provided for this role in the church by giving some the gift of helmsman (sometimes translated leadership, or administrations). This gift is mentioned in 1 Cor. 12:28, and comes from



the Greek word *kubernesis*, which literally means to steer or pilot. The same gift is referred to in Romans 12: 8. There Paul uses the word *proistimi*, which is translated as governorship, or oversight. It is translated in the English language as leadership.

As each person honors the gifts and callings of God in others, and is secure and clear about his or her role and calling, there will be unity. That unity in turn will flow out into the body and be a great source of inspiration to others to take up the place God has given them. As each person is functioning in his or her gifts, the body is joined together and grows into the likeness of Christ. Then the purposes of God for that fellowship of men and women are accomplished to the glory of God and the worship of His Son, Jesus, in the nations.

Amen