

(One Body in Christ) 5. Submission and Leadership

by Zac Poonen

Submission to divinely-appointed authority is God's method of leading us on to spiritual maturity.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:8, 1 Corinthians 16:15, Galatians 5:6, Ephesians 5:21, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Timothy 5:17, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the laws of the Kingdom of God being opposite to earthly kingdoms, emphasizing the call for submission and service in the Body of Christ. He highlights the importance of honoring Christ by submitting to one another, serving with humility, and lovingly serving one another. Poonen explains that submission is not just obedience but also denying oneself, following the example of Jesus who constantly denied His rights. He stresses the significance of submitting to divinely-appointed authority in the Church, including leaders, elders, and spiritual guides, as a means to spiritual maturity and growth.

Transcript

The laws of the Kingdom of God are quite opposite to the laws of earthly kingdoms as different as Heaven is from earth (Isaiah 55:8, 9).

On earth, leaders who exercise authority over others are considered to be superior, and those who have to submit, inferior. But it is exactly the reverse in the Body of Christ. The laws of the Body call us to:

Honour Christ by submitting to each other" (Ephesians 5:21 - TLB);

Serve each other with humble spirits" (1 Peter 5:5 - TLB);

and "through love, serve one another" (Galatians 5:6).

Every member is called to submit to and serve the other. "How is this possible?", one may ask, "Are not the younger ones called to submit to the elders?"

Such a question arises because submission is often misunderstood to mean obedience alone. But we can submit to others by denying ourselves also. This is how Jesus lived. He denied His rights constantly in His

relationships with others. This is the primary meaning of submission. And this is what each member of the Body is called to do.

Jesus has shown us the glory of submission, and so we should rejoice to walk this pathway all through our lives.

Submission to Divinely-Appointed Authority

God is the ultimate authority in the universe. There is no doubt about that whatsoever. But God also delegates authority. Government rulers, parents and Church leaders have authority in society, homes and churches.

The Church is not, as some consider it, a democracy where everyone is directly responsible to God alone. No. There are leaders appointed by the Lord in the Body, whom we should submit to, and obey. This is the will of God and clearly taught in Scripture.

Just as the Word of God commands people to submit to rulers, wives to husbands, children to parents, and servants to masters, so also it commands subjection in the Church.

For example the Bible teaches that man is God's delegated authority over woman. Even though redeemed men and women are equally members of the Body of Christ, yet God commands woman to be in subjection to man in the Church (1 Corinthians 11:3; 14:33-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-13).

Similarly, God has placed elders to give leadership to local churches. Where elders are truly placed of God in a church, they are the Lord's delegates and wield something of His authority. The Lord told the disciples whom He sent out, "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me" (Luke 10:16).

The Word of God has commands such as:

Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labour among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13). Now I urge you brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints) that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labours" (1 Corinthians 16:15, 16). Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders" (1 Peter 5:5).

God places us as members of Christ's Body in fellowship-groups (churches or teams of Christian workers). Therein, we are called to submit to the spiritual leaders God appoints over us, and to move with them as a team. In individual matters, it comes to us through our spiritual leaders.

In Acts 16:9, 10, we read that Paul alone received guidance from God as to where he and his team of workers were to proceed next. His team, comprising of Silas, Timothy and Luke, followed him, fully

believing that God was leading, for they were working under Paul's leadership. It was not necessary for them to obtain separate guidance from God for their move, for it was a team matter and God had already spoken to their leader.

In the human body too, certain members are so placed that they have to move when certain other members move. For example, the little finger on my right hand is an independent member that can move by itself, in direct obedience to signals from the head. At the same time, being a member of my right arm, it has to move along with that arm when the arm moves. It cannot detach itself from my arm at such times and refuse to move, for God has placed it as a part of the 'team' of members that constitute my right arm. It does not have to move when my left arm moves, for it is not a member of that team, but it does have to move with its own team.

If God has placed us in a church fellowship, or in a team of Christian workers, we are obliged to submit to the leadership that God has placed over us and to follow them in team matters. The only thing that we need to be sure of is that God has placed us in that team. Once that matter is settled, there is no question but that God expects us to submit to and obey our leaders. Many problems in Christian work are solved, once this Scriptural principle is understood.

Consider the example of the Son of God Himself. As a young lad, we read that He lived in subjection to Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:51). Jesus was perfect. Joseph and Mary were not. Yet the Perfect One lived for years in subjection to imperfect human beings, because that was God's will for Him. The Father's will settled all matters with finality for Jesus. If His Father wanted him to live in subjection to Joseph and Mary, He would do just that - and that too, for as long as His Father wanted Him to.

A time did come later on in Jesus' life, when (after His baptism) He ceased to be subject to them - when His Father called Him to leave His home and move out into His ministry as the Son of God. Thereafter, His answer to His mother Mary was, "What do I have to do with you" (John 2:4). But as long as His Father kept Him in subjection to Joseph and Mary, He joyfully submitted.

So we see, from the example of the Perfect Son of God too, that the only important question is, "Is it God's will that I should be in this fellowship?". If the answer is 'Yes', then it becomes our duty to submit to God-appointed leadership.

Rebellion against authority was the first sin committed in the universe, when Lucifer, the head of the angels, rebelled against God's authority over him.

In the world today, there are two spirits operating - the Spirit of Christ leading people to submit to divinely-constituted authority, and the spirit of Satan leading people to rebel against such authority.

The spirit of rebellion is rife today in society, in the home and in the Church too. This is a clear indication of the world rapidly drifting away from God, and being increasingly controlled by Satan. We are called as members of Christ's Body to stand against this satanic principle and to follow Christ's example of submission.

We can never lose out by submission to God-appointed leadership. On the other hand, we have a lot to lose by rebellion.

Submission to divinely-appointed leadership is God's method of leading us on to spiritual maturity. We shall remain spiritually stunted if we do not submit where God calls us to.

Many a believer has never learnt in experience, the reality of God's sovereignty because he has never known what it is to be checked and thwarted in his plans, as a result of a humble submission to his spiritual leaders. No one can serve God effectively or be a spiritual leader himself who has never known submission to others at any time in his life.

Submission is not something disgraceful and oppressive, as the Devil whispers in our ears. On the contrary, it is the means by which God protects us spiritually. In the early years of our Christian life, when we are still ignorant of the ways of God, we can be saved from many a pitfall ourselves and also be protected from leading others astray in our youthful zeal, if we submit to our spiritual leaders. Those years spent in submission can also be the time when God teaches us the laws of His Kingdom and thereby makes us spiritually wealthy, so that we can have a ministry to others.

How much we lose when we evade the pathway of submission!

Leadership

God Himself calls some members of the Body of Christ to exercise spiritual leadership over others.

One of the first things that all such leaders must recognise is that Christ is the only Head of the Body. Headship is never delegated by Christ to anyone. Individual domination in a local church (or group of churches) or in a fellowship of Christian workers, is therefore a positive violation of the Sovereign Headship of Christ.

This is why the leadership prescribed for the New Testament Church is through a body of elders (plural not singular). The elders together are to exercise spiritual authority (See Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1).

In Matthew 18:18-20, Jesus said that where two or three gathered together in His Name, He would be present in their midst giving them authority to bind and to free. The immediate context of the passage (see verse 17) seems to indicate that Christ was referring primarily (though not exclusively) to the elders of the Church (being at least two or three in number) exercising this authority. One person by himself apparently could not exercise such authority. (Otherwise it would have been meaningless for Christ to specify "two or three").

We are not living today under Old Testament conditions. In those days, God often appointed one man to lead His people - e.g., Moses, Joshua, David, etc. Those leaders were all types of Christ. Now that Christ has come, He alone is the Head of the people of God. And He works through corporate leadership in the Body.

In the early days of the Christian era, the Lord did give a special authority to the eleven apostles and to the Apostle Paul, over the churches, but that was because the Apostles were the foundation stones of the Church (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14) and were the channels through which God gave His written Word to the Church. Such a situation does not exist today, and so it would not only be foolish but audacious for anyone to justify his authoritarian actions by reference to Paul's action as an apostle. It is more likely that such a person may be like Diotrephes rather than like Paul (3 John 9).

Diotrephes was a self-appointed 'apostle' who wanted to take the lead single-handed in the Church. He is denounced in no uncertain terms by John.

Wherever a man today seeks to give single-handed leadership to God's people, he stands in great danger of leading them back to Old Testament conditions spiritually. This must be borne in mind especially by those with strong leadership capabilities.

No doubt, God does even today, form teams of Christian workers, where a Timothy and a Titus work under a Paul. But this should only be in the initial stages of the formation of the team. As time went by, even Timothy and Titus were considered by Paul as fellow-workers of equal standing and not as junior helpers.

The divinely-ordained plan for leadership in the Body of Christ is through a group of elders (whether for a church or for a team of workers). This is a provision that God has made for the safety of the Church - to prevent any one person's point of view becoming too dominant.

It is easy for those with great vision and ability to get impatient with the slowness of others with whom they have to share leadership in Christian work. They may then be tempted to assert themselves, and override others, claiming that they are doing so for the ongoing of the work of God. But such a violation of God's order will finally lead to the stunting of the growth of other members of the Body of Christ.

Look around and see the condition of churches and organisations where there is one strong authoritarian leader, and you will invariably find that the Christians therein are spiritual dwarfs. Such one-man leadership may appear to be dynamic with an abundance of programmes, but the Christians who are led do not grow. This is not God's intention for Christ's Body. He would rather have fewer programmes and projects, and more spiritual growth among the members.

Qualifications for Leaders

Only God can appoint a man to be a spiritual leader. If our appointment to an office is merely by man, we can never exercise Christ's authority. Herein lies the foolishness of those who seek to be voted into positions of Christian leadership - and do not seek to be appointed by God.

A spiritual leader must lead his flock in the way of the Cross. This implies that he must be one who is faithfully walking the way of self-denial himself.

Then again, no one can be a leader in the Body of Christ who does not long to be a servant of others, as Christ Himself was. Jesus said, "The kings and great men of the earth lord it over the people; but among you it is different. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be greatest of all must be the slave of all. For even I, the Messiah, am not here to be served, but to help others" (Mark 10:42-45 - TLB). Paul, the great Apostle, who had an authority exceeding anyone else's was a servant of others (2 Corinthians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 9:19). This is another of the primary qualifications for spiritual leadership.

A spiritual leader is called to exercise authority over those whom God places under him, and at the same time to be a brother to them and a fellow-member in the same Body. It is this delicately-balanced relationship of leader-brother that is often so difficult to maintain. We tend to be unbalanced one way or the other. We shall need much grace from the Lord constantly, if we are to maintain this balance. Hence the absolute necessity for the leader to live close to God in a "face-to-face" relationship. This was the secret of Moses' effective leadership of 3 million of God's people in the most adverse of circumstances for 40 years (Deuteronomy 34:10; Numbers 12:8).

Spiritual authority, being God-given, is not something that we have to assert over others or even force others to submit to. We should never compel others to listen to us or to obey us. God Himself will deal with those who resist His representatives. The servant of the Lord does not ever have to strive with men (2 Timothy 2:24, 25) - for if God is behind our authority, why should we seek to defend our position. God will Himself defend us and establish our authority. If we are seeking to assert our authority ourselves, it must be because our authority is not God-given at all.

A spiritual leader should not defend himself or seek to justify and vindicate himself, when attacked or slandered. The Bible says, "Christ is your example. Follow in His stepsHe never answered back when insulted; when He suffered He did not threaten to get even; He left His case in the hands of God Who always judges fairly" (1 Peter 2:21, 23 - TLB). The Son of God, the greatest authority, refused to strive with men and to assert His rule over them. He left it to God to defend Him and to vindicate Him. This is the path that all under-shepherds in the Church must tread. As a spiritual leader, if you live under God's authority yourself, you can safely leave everything in His Hands. You can afford to ignore slander and criticism and backbiting against you, for God's promise is that He Himself will defend His servants against such attacks (Isaiah 54:17). Oswald Chambers has said that when someone flings mud at us, if we try to wipe it off, we will stain our clothes. But if we leave it alone, it will dry up in due course and fall off by itself; and there will not be any stain. This is the wisest way to deal with slander.

Watchman Nee, out of the many years of experience that God gave him in the exercise of spiritual leadership in China, gives us some wise counsel in his book, Spiritual authority. He says:

"It is not the violent or the strong but a man like Paul whose bodily presence is weak and whose speech is of no account (2 Corinthians 10:10) - whom God will establish as an authority....eople usually assume such things as the following to be the necessary requirements for an authority: splendour and magnificence, strength of personality, bearing or appearance, and power. To be an authority, they reason, one must possess a strong determination, clever ideas, and eloquent lips.

But it is not these that represent authority; instead they stand for the flesh. No one in the Old Testament exceeded Moses as a God-established authority, yet he was the meekest of all men. While he was in Egypt he was quite fierce, both in killing the Egyptian and in reprimanding the Hebrews. He dealt with people by his own fleshly hand. So at that time God did not appoint him as an authority. It was only after he had become very meek - more than all men on earth (Numbers 12:3) - that God used him to be an authority.

The person least likely to be given authority is often the very one who considers himself an authority. Likewise, the more authority a person thinks he has, the less he actually does have.... "Authority is set up to execute God's order, not to uplift oneself. It is to give God's children a sense of God, not to give a sense of oneself. The important thing is to help people to be subject to God's authority....To be a delegated authority is not at all an easy thing, because it requires the emptying of oneself....

"Authority is not a matter of position. Where spiritual ministry is lacking, there can be no positional authority. Whoever has spiritual service before God has authority before men. Who, then, can fight for this authority, for there is no way to strive for ministry? Just as ministry is distributed by the Lord, so authority is also decided by Him....We should not attempt to outdo the authority of our ministry....Many brothers mistakenly imagine that they can take up authority at random, not knowing that....one's authority before men is equal to one's ministry before God.

If authority exceeds ministry, it becomes positional, and is therefore no longer spiritual.... "Those who seek to exercise authority should not be given authority, for God never gives authority to such persons. But strange to say, he who senses his incompetency is the one to whom God gives authority....A man needs to fall before God before he can be used; whenever he lifts himself up he is rejected by God.... "How serious will be the judgement upon those who grab God's authority with their carnal hands.

May we fear authority as we fear the fire of Hell. To represent God is not an easy thing; it is too great and too marvellous for us to touch. We need to walk strictly in the way of obedience. The path for us is obedience, not authority; it is to be servants, not to be heads; to be slaves, not to be rulers. Both Moses and David were the greatest of authorities, yet they were not people who tried to establish their own authority. Those today who desire to be in authority ought to follow their footsteps.

There should always be fear and trembling in this matter of being an authority." The Church today suffers because of a great dearth of spiritual leaders. There are many who hold titles and exercise their authority officially. But spiritual leadership is scarcely to be found. Jesus once looked out at the crowds that came to him and felt great pity for them, "because their problems were so great and they didn't know what to do or where to go for help. They were like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36 - TLB). The situation is just the same today.

We desperately need leaders in the Church, who have the heart of a shepherd and the spirit of a servant, men who fear God and tremble at His Word.

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