

# WHO HAS AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH?

*This article is a compilation of dialogue Pastor Williams had with several individuals; thus, it is arranged in a Question & Answer format for the benefit of the reader...*

***Thought: No pastor has any authority in himself. All authority in the local church is the WORD OF GOD.***

*“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers (authority). For there is no power (authority) but of God: the powers (authorities) that be are ordained of God.” —Romans 13:1*

There are, of course, different jurisdictions of divine delegated authority, including—*marital, parental, vocational, civil, spiritual*, etc. It’s self-evident in the Scriptures that the underlining spiritual principles that define and outline these areas of delegated authority are essentially the same. Moreover, each of these spheres of authority (*power*) are indeed vested by *God, His Word, and His ordination*. For example, a husband/father has authority in his own family and marriage because God has both ordained and delegated it to be so via the *Scriptures*. However, though the origin of this authority is God and His Word, I believe it’s also accurate to say this authority is intrinsic to the position because God has universally given and ordained this authority to all husbands/fathers. Furthermore, I believe this is true for all spheres of divinely-delegated spheres of authority—*pastors, elders*, and all God-ordained positions. God is also *life*, “*For in him we live, and move, and have our being...*” (*Acts 17:28a*). Obviously, there can be no life, natural or spiritual, without God. Yet, the life He’s granted to us is still intrinsic. We are living beings though the foundation for our life is God. Likewise, all authority comes from God, but *civil magistrates, pastors, parents, employers*, etc. are intrinsically authoritarian.

Divinely delegated authority only extends within limited jurisdictions and dominions. Nonetheless, the underlying governing principles are the same in all spheres. For example, note the transition between *1 Peter 2:25* and *1 Peter 3:1* (*remember, in the original text there were no divisions of chapters*). The end of chapter two, which addresses the Christian’s relationship with *civil authority*, naturally flows into chapter three using the word, ‘*Likewise*’ in the introduction found in *1 Peter 3:1*. Chapter three addresses the Christian wife’s obligation to *submit* her husband, obviously presenting a comparison between these two chapters and the distinct *jurisdictions of authority* addressed in each. Clearly, the Scriptures equate these spheres of *divinely delegated authority* and though they have different jurisdictions, the basic applications of authority are the same. Granted, there are subtle distinctions and not all authority has as far-reaching an influence. These limitations are generally defined by the jurisdictions. Case in point, an *employer* only has authority over an *employee* in the jurisdiction of *employment*. However, a *father* would have far more authority over that same employee if it were his son, living at home. Again, the *employer* only has authority in the jurisdiction of *employment*, but the *father-employer* would have authority in both the jurisdictions of the *home/family* and *employment*. For example, an *employer*, theoretically, would not have the authority to establish a young man’s bed-time, while a father would. In this way, the jurisdictions limit the influence of the authority.

The obligation of those in a position of subjection to any God-ordained earthly authority is first to rightly determine the jurisdiction of that authority and correspondingly acquiesce, unless submission to that authority causes sin or disobedience to God. This principle is communicated in what I refer to as the ‘*Golden Rule of Submission*’ found in...

*“Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” —1 Corinthians 11:1*

All divinely delegated authority is established with this basic principle intact. True, jurisdictions and influence are different and limited, but the foundational principles are akin—and quite frankly, church government would follow accordingly.

***Thought: Pastors should only lead by example.***

Of course, they should lead by example, but authority is authority. Authority is not something that can be avoided, it can only be re-delegated outside God’s design—that’s the danger. It exists in all these God-ordained spheres and relationships and to put unscriptural limits where God has not put limits is to redistribute authority to those who should be in subjection (*which often strengthens and encourages rebellion*). Is authority abused? Of course, and all persons in authority will answer to God (*Jam 3:1*). We’ve all seen examples of *husbands, parents, and pastors* who selfishly abused their authority. Is it sin? Yes? But we must not redefine authority or restructure God’s stated order for *marriage, family, and church* because some abuse authority. Imagine if with knee-jerk rationale some might cry, ‘*Give the wives and children a vote to determine if they should purchase a new car!*’, thus, a more vile and crippling disaster ensues than even a husband unwisely making a purchase that will strap the family financially.

***Thought: There is absolutely no correlation of a man’s authority over his wife or children and a leader in the local body. None.***

Really? The *Apostle Paul*, under divine inspiration, used the marriage relationship making an irrefutable correlation obviously cross-comparing spheres of jurisdictions. Again, *authority is authority*. *Jesus* is the *head* over a *man*, a *man* is the *head* over his *wife*. Of course, no one has the same authority over another human-being as *Christ*, but the essential principles are the same, only limited by jurisdiction. To deny this is to wax irrational.

*“Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.”*  
—*Ephesians 5:24*

Certainly, there are corporate decisions that God has invested pastors/elders with authority to make that require more than simply ‘*leading by example*’.

***Thought: Correct me if I’m wrong, but you disagree with my comment that a pastor has no inherent authority within himself, right?***

No. As I originally pointed out and the Scriptures clearly teach, *all authority comes from God*. I was only

offering a qualification, that in the delegating of authority God has invested this ‘*authority*’ to those in certain positions and that authority is intrinsic. I also strongly believe (*and this we appear to disagree on*), that the basic principles of authority, in every God-ordained sphere, are correlating. Granted, not all authority is as binding and all spheres of authority are limited to their respective jurisdictions, but we can learn about one by accurately understanding others...

***Thought: According to Ephesians 5:21 aren't we all to submit to one another?***

*“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” —Ephesians 5:21*

I agree, in a very general sense, Christians should walk in humility, willing to learn from one another as you mention above (*Rom 15:14*). However, in regard to *Ephesians 5:21*, I tend to see it a bit differently. I do not view this as a ‘*stand-alone*’ command of universal submission without qualification (*which is quite impossible actually, and self-conflicting*). In context, my understanding is this verse serves as an introductory statement to the remainder of the rest of *Ephesians*, minus the benediction (*Eph 5:22-6:9*), telling us exactly ‘*how*’ we are to submit one to another, notice the progression of thought in context...

*“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord....” Etc. and so forth as we continue to read (and note, in each sphere, the principles of authority/ submission obviously correlate).*

***Thought: Well, if it's not explicitly commanded in the Scriptures a pastor cannot impose it on the congregation.***

I contend the basic principle of submission not only applies when there is an ‘*explicit Biblical command*’ but is also binding when there is presented ‘*a non-contradictory directive*’ given within the proper jurisdiction (*not causing one to sin or disobey God/ Scripture*). Let me briefly explain: in every sphere of God-ordained authority—whether *marriage, home, vocation, civil*, or the *church*—those in positions of subjection should submit in the respective jurisdictions unless submission causes one to sin. This is self-evident, for example: parents have the God-ordained authority to demand their children clean their rooms. Yet, ‘*room-cleaning*’ is not an explicit command in the *Bible*, but only the most rabid rebels would suggest such a demand is parental tyranny. Likewise, in the jurisdiction of the church, leaders have authority to make decisions that aren’t explicitly outlined in Scripture *as long as it's within the proper jurisdiction and doesn't contradict the Scriptures or causes someone to sin*. For example, establishing that the service be opened with prayer instead of announcements; a seemingly benign decision, but a choice a pastor has the authority to make yet not explicitly found in Scripture. Contrariwise, if a pastor tried to tell families how much money they were to spend on groceries every week, that would be stepping outside his jurisdiction.

***Thought: Give me some examples where pastors or Elders have any authority outside of the Bible...***

Again, I don’t believe *pastors/ elders*, like *husbands, parents, employers*, or *civil magistrates* have any authority

outside of the *Bible*. However, I believe it's important to define exactly what that means. Does that mean *church leaders* have no authority to establish absolutes unless it's explicitly taught in the Scriptures? For example, consider some rather universal and common issues that are not explicitly addressed in Scripture that would face almost any local assembly...

- What days and times will the corporate gatherings be during the week? Who has authority to determine this? Should we take a vote? For a *Sunday* service some might want a 8:00am service, others may favor a more traditional 10:00am service, while yet others prefer an afternoon gathering. For a mid-week service some may suggest a *Tuesday* meeting, others might fancy a *Wednesday* service, and still others may suggest no mid-week service at all. What should be done? Who has the authority to make these decisions?
- How shall we dress when we gather? *Sister A* supposes she can wear a *bikini* and *Brother B* would like to wear nothing but a jock-strap, while *Sister C* insists that modesty demands she be covered from head to toe. Who decides what the standard will be?
- What temperature will the AC be set on?
- What about the selection of worship songs/hymns at the services? Must everyone take turns on determining what the local assembly sings each service?

...and, I could go on and on. *Everyone can't submit to everyone else in these matters*. Such a view is impossible. Can two people mutually submit to one another in a specific circumstance while they diametrically disagree about the same issue? Absolutely not. In essence, this interpretation encourages chaos and anarchy. God is a God of order. The very term '*kingdom of God*' implies order and protocol, and order presupposes authority. This lack of clarity in regard to *authority* is completely foreign to the writers of the N.T., who freely communicated thoughts such as...

*"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."* —Hebrews 13:17

***Though: Who said the pastor sets the temp on the AC, that could be a deacon or the grounds keeper of the church, and if a pastor tried to usurp his authority over the groundskeeper and say, "I'm the pastor, I set the temp on the AC", he would be way out of bounds.***

Let's take a step backwards. You're assuming the *grounds-keeper* has authority. I must ask, *'Where does this apparent arbitrary authority you've granted the grounds-keeper come from and by what authority have you assumed he has it?'*

Remember, your original assertion...

*"No pastor has any authority in himself. All authority in the local church is the WORD OF GOD."*

Can you provide Scripture to support the idea that the *grounds-keeper* has authority to make this decision above all others in the local assembly?

Don't misunderstand my point, I'm not suggesting the pastor *must* make all these decisions (*much should be delegated*). However, where there would be a conflict, there must be 'authority' to settle disagreement. I used basic, practical, common situations to explain that there are certainly decisions that must be made that are clearly not explicitly addressed in the *Bible* or would, at the very least, demand practical interpretation. Moreover, and this is key, if you assert a pastor or elder(s) must have an explicit directive from the Scriptures to determine and establish a corporate standard or make a practical decision, then you likewise must demand the same criteria for anyone else. In other words, if you insist, '*No Pastor has authority to impose this view or make this decision because there is no explicit Scriptural teaching to address this matter*', then you essentially concede the situation cannot be addressed corporately and must left to the whims of individuals.

***Thought: The pastor cannot determine what the AC is set on, or what specific time we meet, or if there is an early morning prayer meeting, etc. and no one should honor such tyrannical decisions because there is no explicit directive in the Scriptures regarding this matter.***

It's declarations like these that really uncover what's underneath this view. Do you see the philosophical corner you've painted yourself into? Tell me, if this is true, then on what ground do you arbitrarily award authority to anyone else whether individual or plural? If a pastor or elder cannot make such decisions then who can and, more importantly, why? Ironically, if this is true, then *no one* can make these decisions—not *pastor*, not *plurality of elders*, not *board* or *congregation*. Why? Because if an explicit Biblical directive is necessary to exercise authority and it is determined that no explicit Biblical directive exists, then it stands to reason no one can rightly exercise authority—not a *pastor*, not a *plurality of elders*, not a *board*, not even a *congregational vote*. If you insist otherwise, you wax philosophically inconsistent and undermine your own premise for authority. This is why I'm proposing that *submission to authority*, in their respective spheres, is a matter of '*non-contradiction*', not the absolute of an '*explicit command*'. I learned this by rightly understanding other spheres of divine-delegated authority. Try your model in the *marriage*, in the *home*, on the *job* and you will facilitate disorder and rebellion in the extreme.

I contend these views on *spiritual authority*, which are anything but Scriptural and are actually very dangerous. I also contend that any local church that adopts these views will be marginalized, will become spiritually stagnant, and forfeit the spiritual ability to truly disciple believers.

—B.W.

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