

2 Signs of Abusive Church Authority

“The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority.” – Stanley Milgram

“Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority.” – Oscar Wilde

“Showing a lack of self-control is in the same vein granting authority to others: ‘Perhaps I need someone else to control me.’” – Criss Jami, Venus in Arms

“Those who whine about parents and authority for too long invariably remain or become narcissists themselves.” – Richard Rohr

The subject of authority and a believer's need to submit to it is a tricky issue. There are two reasons in my opinion that the subject of authority is problematic.

- 1) Many authorities abuse people.
- 2) Submission to authority is often associated with personal weakness.

Both of these things are true. There is a long sordid history in the government and church of authorities abusing those under their authority. Presidents have abused citizens. Church leaders have abused parishioners. Teachers have abused students. Parents have abused children. That's reality in our fallen world.

Also, many of those under authority have allowed authority to

shelter them from personal responsibility. It's easier for some for a parent/pastor to tell them what to do than for them to figure it out themselves. Many have turned a blind eye to government abuses because it was easier to play along than to stand up against it.

Despite all that, Paul says important words in Romans 13 that make me still take authority seriously for myself.

Romans 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

This is an amazing statement by Paul. Could it be true that all authority ultimately flows down from God? That the powers that be that we wrestle with obeying now have actually been set in place by God Himself? If Paul is speaking truth here (and my conviction about all of Scripture is that he is), then he's giving me an important framework in which to view all other issues of authority.

The primary thing I take away from Romans 13:1 is that, given the two issues I mentioned before, I STILL must stay engaged with the authorities in my life. GOD wants me to stay engaged with the authorities in my life. Do authorities abuse? Yes! Can authorities dictate a person's choices in such a way that that person would cease to grow or take responsibility for their own life? Yes! But does authority still flow from God and need to be respected? Yes!

There are different types of authority in play in my life. First is government authority, and I have a strong conviction that I need to obey government authority, even when I don't agree with their mandates, until the point that such obedience causes me to violate a more strongly held conviction from Scripture.

We are fortunate in the United States to live in the FORM of

government that we have. But we are also spoiled. We get up in arms over healthcare reform or our cows grazing on federal land. In contrast, Jesus' government hung citizens on crosses to die if they disagreed with them. Nevertheless, Jesus obeyed Caesar in every way He could that did not compromise the perfections of God.

I wrestle more with Christian authority than government authority. Does God give us Christian authority to which He wants us to subject ourselves? I've had my own journey on this topic, and I have come full circle. From the child who couldn't wait to get out of her parents' home, to the one actively soliciting her parents' advice for the life issues I face. From the church member appalled at the abuses my pastors meted out on other church members, to one again actively seeking the wisdom of my council of elders as I walk the road of life.

The truth is that bad authorities and good authorities both exist. Sometimes they exist together in one entity! Scripture teaches us to stay engaged with authority regardless. Stay engaged WISELY, but stay engaged. We need authority. Every last one of us need someone speaking into our lives. It is great truth from Proverbs that there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors.

Having experienced bad church authority in the past, I have two safeguards that are helpful to me as I evaluate it for the future.

1. Not all who say they are a spiritual authority actually are. According to the standards Paul sets up in I Timothy, it is not easy to become a spiritual authority, and there are clear things one can do to violate that authority and be removed from it (or to continue in a position illegitimately). I have no moral, biblical obligation to subject myself to self-proclaimed authorities who do not, in fact, meet the

Bible's clear guidelines for who is and is not a legitimate authority in a believer's life.

2. Legitimate spiritual authority is under spiritual authority. I have a strong conviction in the checks and balances that the Church has put in place over the last 500 years since the protestant reformation. I note too that the spiritual authorities with whom I've personally had bad experiences each built their authority independent of established authority in their own life. They started independently, then build their own pseudo authority structure around themselves. But they never repented for originally walking away from their own personal God-given authority structure, and like the last quote above predicts, became their own narcissistic center of their own authority universe.

Personally, I have put myself in a church structure with a presbytery. It too is an imperfect authority system, but I'm coming to value it deeply nonetheless. Years ago, the Church in wisdom (in my case, the Presbyterian Church of America) recognized that everyone needs to be under authority to someone. My pastor often says that if we don't like something he does, we have a place to take that and be truly heard.

He is under authority – a long established authority structure that is not beholden to him as its narcissistic center. I note that many believers in my neck of the woods are returning again to denominations with long established authority structures after similar experiences to mine with those who started their churches outside of an authority structure.

When I write on authority, I know I must write about it with the two limitations I stated above. Any discussion of authority without acknowledging the potential pitfalls with its abuse is simply irresponsible. Yet, I believe that God still gives us legitimate, loving authorities in our lives for our good.

The best authorities speak wisdom into my life and wait patiently for me to hear it. They don't shame or pressure, but they speak truth and offer suggestions based on their observations. Every one of us needs those types of people in our lives, and when we find them, they are a good gift from God to help us along the treacherous journey of life.

I've linked to this sermon on God's Good Undershepherds many times before, but I will do it once again. It is a powerful exploration of the yearnings in our hearts for someone we can trust to speak into our lives and the problems sin has brought into our world as we wrestle with that longing. It made me cry this morning as I listen to it again, for I resonate deeply with what my pastor says in it.

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