

The Forgotten Power of True, Biblical Submission

Perhaps no other word offends the modern ear more than the idea of *submission*. It seems like one of those long-abandoned notions—like indentured servitude or leeching—that was left in the dustbin of history for good reason. Submission offends us because it presents a direct challenge to our philosophy of self-importance. For most of us, we prefer to believe in a god that did away with such primitive requirements long ago in favor of a more mutually respectful, egalitarian relationship.

But when my friend Jonathan Bock and I began researching our new book *The Way Back: How Christians Blew Our Credibility and How We Get it Back*, we were reminded how often submission to God is a key principle in the Bible, and it is made most evident in two areas: community compliance to church authority and personal obedience to Scripture.

In the case of church authority, the New Testament notes the offices, requirements, and responsibilities of pastors, deacons, elders and bishops, because for the early church, submission by the community mattered. The movement was in its beginning stages, and unity among believers was desperately needed.

Today, that sense of unity is all but lost. In cities across America, Christians change attendance and membership with such frequency that the term “church hopper” is now in our lexicon. Sadly, we know of a church that lost hundreds of members on a single Sunday when the cool, new church opened up a few blocks away. The internet has also given rise to Christians who “feel called” to criticize their local church through blogs and social media, instead of working through disagreements in person as the Bible outlines.

The greatest tragedy of our loss of submission to church authority is pastors who fall into sin through sexual, financial or other wrongdoing. Because we're media and marketing professionals, we're often called in to give advice to local churches in the wake of those scandals to help them respond to the congregation, to the community and to the press. As a result, we can confirm the heartbreaking number of cases where fallen pastors refuse to submit to other leaders for healing and restoration. Often, they simply move to another part of town and start a new church, or incredibly, stay where they are and never miss a day in the pulpit. In those cases, we're not sure which is worse—pastors living in sin whose pride keeps them in the pulpit or their church members who don't care.

Vast numbers of Christians have moved so far away from obedience to Scripture that they pick and choose doctrine to suit their own whims. This plague is so ubiquitous now in American Christianity that “cafeteria Christian” could describe a significant part of our community.

But what if we decided to honor God by submitting ourselves to church authority and obedience to Scripture? What if we looked at our local church not through the lens of “how does it serve me,” but rather “how can I serve it”? What if we leaned into the Bible verses that challenge and offend us and through prayer, asked God to help us to understand and obey them?

Impossible, you say?

If we did, we'd be modeling ourselves after the Master. In an extraordinary passage in the letter to the church in Philippi, Paul explained Christ's obedience and the humble submission required of us as well:

Let this mind be in you all, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But He emptied Himself, taking

upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in the form of a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus understood what we have forgotten: that we need submission in our lives to achieve God's desire to restore humanity—and He calls us to follow His example. But ironically, total submission actually leads to *more* liberty, not less. John Newton, the reformed slaver and lyricist of "Amazing Grace," once penned the following verse. It explains the mystery of submission at work in real time: "To see the Law by Christ fulfilled/ And hear His pardoning voice,/ Transforms the slave into a child/ And duty into choice."

Could it be that the shackles of addiction and sin are actually *loosened* by submission?

There's only one way to know for sure.

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