UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Titus 2:15

By

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Titus Lesson 9

**Understanding Biblical Authority**  
Titus 2:15

In a “Frank & Ernest” cartoon, the two bunglers are standing before the Pearly Gates. St. Peter, holding the keys, is scowling at Ernie. Frank whispers to Ernie, “If I were you I’d change my shirt, Ernie.” Ernie’s T-shirt reads, “Question Authority.”

Americans think that questioning or defying authority is our inalienable constitutional right. If our President begins to act as if he were the king, we rally to throw him out of office. It carries down through our society, all the way to rebellion on the family level. We resist the concept of authority. We don’t like submitting to anyone.

When it comes to the church, most American evangelicals do not view it as a place where you submit to the leadership for the purpose of growth and accountability, but rather as a store where you shop as a consumer. If you like the place and it services your needs, you come back. If another place down the road offers a more pleasant experience, you move your business there. Thus pastors who are trying to market their churches don’t dare say anything that might offend or upset the customers. The customer is king. You want to please your customers. With this consumer view about the church, the idea of spiritual authority, of proclaiming, “Thus says the Lord,” seems odd and out of place.

The idea of spiritual authority scares us because of wackos like Jim Jones, the cult leader who killed over 900 followers back in the 1970’s. Or, we think of cult leaders who arrange marriages and demand that followers turn over all their assets to the cult and blindly follow orders. Even in less extreme situations, many Christians have had bad experiences with authoritarian pastors who wrongly lord it over the flock. Often these men mistakenly claim that you can’t “touch the Lord’s anointed,” meaning that the pastor is beyond criticism or correction, even if he is engaging in sinful or un-biblical practices. They label anyone who speaks out as divisive or contentious. But they misunderstand true biblical authority.
So as we approach Titus 2:15, we must avoid these extremes and seek to understand how these words apply: “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” Titus was the apostle Paul’s appointed delegate, and in that sense, no one since that time is in exactly the same position. But, we have the apostolic message in the New Testament, which states that elders are to rule in the churches and members are to submit (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). Thus we need proper understanding about the subject of biblical authority. Our text is saying,

**Men of God must teach God’s Word and lead the church with true biblical authority, and the church must submit to such authority.**

Note carefully that Paul does not say, “Let no one disregard the word you preach,” but rather, “Let no one disregard you.” That was written not only to Titus, but also to the church. Undoubtedly Paul’s intention was that the people not disregard Titus’ message. But by stating it as he does, Paul brings out the fact that people who would not be so bold as to reject the Word can nonetheless dodge the pointed application of the Word to their lives by disregarding the man who teaches the Word. If he exhorts or reproves them from the Word, they can say, “Who does he think he is to say such things? He probably doesn’t practice what he preaches!” And so, by disregarding the preacher, they disregard the Word. In reality, they are not in submission to God, but they dodge the serious implications of that by attacking God’s messenger.

I want to make seven statements about biblical authority, based upon Titus 2:15 and a few other texts. My purpose is to help you understand this important concept so that you will submit all of your life to God, who is the ultimate authority, and reap the blessings that come from a life of submission to Him.

1. **All authority on the human plane is delegated authority.**

   All authority on earth comes from the Sovereign of the universe. Note Romans 13:1-2: “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and
they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.” Paul goes on to talk about government authorities, but his statement shows that all authority comes from God.

The Bible makes the same point in Daniel 4, where God humbles the proud Nebuchadnezzar. The chapter emphasizes (Dan. 4:17, 25) “that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes.” All authority is delegated from God and those in authority are accountable to God.

This means that no person, no matter what office he holds, is above rebuke if he strays from the ultimate authority of God’s Word. Daniel had to tactfully, but directly, confront the proud Nebuchadnezzar about his sin. Later (Daniel 5), he directly confronted Belshazzar with his sin. John the Baptist confronted King Herod with his sin of taking his brother’s wife.

In the local church, the Bible states that elders are not to lord it over those allotted to their charge, but rather to be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). Therefore, if a pastor or a group of elders disregard God’s Word and lord it over the church, they need to be confronted in line with biblical guidelines (1 Tim. 5:19-20). If they do not repent, they should be removed from office and put under church discipline. Only obedient men, who acknowledge that they are under God’s sovereign authority, are in a position to exercise biblical authority in a local church.

2. All authority is vested in a plurality of men on the local church level.

We examined this when we studied Titus 1:5, so I will only mention it in passing here. Whenever the New Testament refers to the elders of a particular local church, it always uses the plural. A plurality of elders over a single local church is God’s way of protecting the church against the abuses of authority that may easily happen if a single man runs the church. The elders must submit to the Lord and be accountable to one another and to the church.

Ray Stedman put it this way (Discovery Paper 3500, “A Pastor’s Authority”), “The task of the elders is not to run the church themselves, but to determine how the Lord in their midst wishes to run his church.” He points out that much of this has already been made known through the Bible. Thus, “In the day-to-day decisions
which every church faces, elders are to seek and find the mind of the Lord through an uncoerced unanimity, reached after thorough and biblically-related discussion. Thus, ultimate authority, even in practical matters, is vested in the Lord and in no one else.” The Lord delegates that authority to a plurality of men in each local church so that no one man can play God.

3. **All authority is designed for our blessing and protection.**

When authority is abused, it hurts those under authority. In such cases, God ultimately will judge the abuser. But when it is exercised properly, authority blesses and protects those under it.

God has instituted several spheres of authority. Romans 13 establishes the authority of civil government, which is supposed to punish lawbreakers and protect those who obey the laws. The government should protect its citizens by passing and upholding just laws. When the government fails to do its job, the citizens suffer. If you get frustrated with the U.S. government, go to a place like Sudan or Somalia, where the governments are weak, corrupt, and aiding evildoers! (We looked at authority in the workplace several weeks ago, so will skip that here.)

Another sphere of authority is the local church. In that sphere, a plurality of elders are to uphold God’s standards of holiness and sound doctrine, to correct those who stray from the truth, to remove from the flock those who refuse to repent so as to protect the rest, and to bless God’s people by instructing them in His ways. Paul’s words (Titus 2:15), “speak and exhort and reprove” indicate that different approaches are needed with different people. With some, just a word is all that is needed to get them back on the path. Others need stronger exhortation. Others need to be convinced or convicted of their wrong (“reprove”; see also, 1 Thess. 5:14).

Another sphere of authority is the family. Husbands are to love their wives and children, leading them into godliness by example and instruction. Wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord (Eph. 5:22) and children are to obey their parents, who are to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:1, 4). If a husband is abusive to his wife or children, he should be confronted, first by the wife. If he continues, the elders of the church should get involved. If he is violating the civil law, then the
government should be called in to protect the family. By the way, the Bible never commands the husband to be the head of the wife. Rather, it simply states that as a fact. The command to husbands is to love your wife sacrificially, just as Christ loved the church. Put your focus there!

I will also add that in my 33 years of marriage, I cannot remember a single time when I had to “pull rank” and use my authority to go over Marla’s head. In every situation we have been able to talk and come to a mutual agreement about what God would have us to do. With regard to your children, the younger the child, the more you have to exercise raw authority, not to get your way, but rather to protect and bless your children with God’s ways. As children grow older, you reason with them and appeal to them to yield to the lordship of Christ. So as they grow older, the situations where you have to exercise parental authority over them should be growing fewer. By the time they are teenagers, they should be walking in obedience to Christ.

So the point is, in whatever sphere, authority is designed for the blessing and protection of those under authority. It is never to be used for the advantage of the one in authority.

4. Authority does not imply superiority.

Feminists who bristle at the thought of a wife submitting to her husband contend that to submit implies inferiority. But note 1 Corinthians 11:3: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” (See also, 1 Corinthians 15:27-28.)

If subjection means inferiority, then it would mean that Jesus Christ is inferior to the Father, which is heresy! The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal as persons in their eternal deity, but to carry out the divine plan of redemption, the Son submitted to the Father and the Spirit submitted to the Son. But the Son and the Spirit are equally God along with the Father.

One of the purposes of marriage is that a husband and wife would reflect the divine image and also, the relationship between Christ and the church (Gen. 1:27; Eph. 5:32). The divine image includes the equality of the Father and Son as persons, but also the submission of the Son to the Father for the purpose of function.
There is no competition or striving for superiority between the Father and the Son. There is infinite mutual love between them, and voluntary submission on the part of the Son. The same relationship should prevail in the Christian home.

5. Authority does imply responsibility and accountability.

We often see authority as a perk, but not as a serious responsibility. When my brother was a boy, he started a club with his friends. He announced that there were two rules in his club: First rule: I am the boss of this club. Second rule: You don’t boss the boss! While it was funny, it’s the way that many think of authority.

A lot of men try to operate as the boss in their homes, but they don’t accept the responsibility and accountability of authority. The key concept of delegated authority is not that I’m the boss, but rather that I’m responsible and accountable. If a business owner hires a manager, the manager has authority to run the business, but the main thing he needs to keep in mind is, it is not his business and he must give an account to the owner.

To be in authority in any sphere means that someday you must give an account to God, who entrusted that position to you. If you use your authority to abuse those under you for your own advantage, you’re going to be in big trouble someday. If you use it to seek to accomplish the Master’s will by blessing and protecting those under your charge, you will be rewarded (Luke 12:42-48; 20:9-16).

But you can’t blame those under your authority for your own lack of godly leadership. If a seaman runs a destroyer into the rocks while the captain is sleeping, the navy will discipline the seaman. But, also they will call the captain on the carpet for not running his ship properly. The same principle applies to both the church and the home. If a church refuses to follow God’s Word, each member will answer to God. But also He will hold the elders accountable. Why didn’t they confront the errors and lead the church into obedience? If a family drifts away from the Lord, each member will answer to the Lord. But, also the husband will be called to account if he didn’t exhort and correct and set a godly example.

One of the main problems in Christian homes today is that husbands are spiritually passive, while the wives excel in Bible
knowledge and spiritual maturity. In a business, if a manager has an employee who knows more about some aspect of the business than he does, if he is wise he will follow that employee’s advice and he will scramble to learn about that aspect of the business. But, he will not abdicate authority to that employee.

The same principle should apply in the home. If a husband realizes that his wife has more biblical understanding than he does, he would be foolish to go against what she says. But, he should not just abdicate spiritual authority to her. Rather, he should remember that he will answer to God for the spiritual direction of the home. And he should get busy studying the Bible and walking with God so that he can manage the home in a biblical manner.

Also, the way authority works is that if the one (or ones) in authority sin, those under authority will suffer for it. When David sinned with Bathsheba, David’s family and eventually the entire nation suffered the consequences. When he later sinned by numbering the people, thousands died as a result. As a husband, one of my strongest instincts is to protect my wife and children. But, if I don’t deal with my own sin (including “secret” sins, such as lust), I am exposing my family to the enemy’s attacks. If as a pastor I am dabbling in sin, I expose the entire flock to danger.

Thus the concept that authority implies responsibility and accountability should strike fear and trembling into the hearts of everyone in authority. We should be careful to confess and repent of all sin, so that those whom we are supposed to bless and protect do not suffer and so that we can give a good account when we stand before the Lord.

6. Authority concerns character primarily and position secondarily.

In the world and, sadly, often in the church, these get reversed. A man seeks the position of authority, but he lacks the character to lead. Once he secures the position, he doesn’t command respect, so he asserts his authority by lording it over others (Mark 10:42-45). They finally get fed up and rebel.

When Paul tells Titus (2:15), “Let no one disregard you,” he did not mean that Titus was to assert his authority by letting people know that they couldn’t push him around. Rather, he meant, “Ti-
tus, be such an example of godliness and good deeds (2:7-8) that people will not be able to disregard your message because they know that your life backs it up.” It is the same thing that Paul said to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12), when he told him not to let anyone look down on his youthfulness. How was Timothy to do that? Was he to let people know that he had authority because Paul had put him in charge? No, Paul says, “but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.”

Thus character is the primary thing in authority, because godly character commands respect and a man with respect has authority. But, there is also a secondary aspect of authority, namely, the authority of position or office. Hopefully, the man who fills the office graces the position with godly character. But even if he falls short, we need to maintain a certain respect for the office.

When Paul wrote Romans 13, the supreme authority in Rome was the godless emperor, Nero. He was an immoral, cruel madman, but even so, Paul commanded believers to submit out of respect for the God-ordained position of authority. In a similar manner, Peter told slaves to obey unjust masters and wives to submit to unbelieving husbands (1 Pet. 2:18-3:6). Why? Because we must respect the position of authority, which God ordained. This does not mean that someone who is abusing his position should not be confronted and, perhaps, removed through proper channels. But even such confrontation must be done with respect towards the God-ordained position of authority.

I once heard Pastor Bill Yaeger tell how when he had just become the pastor of First Baptist Church of Modesto, a little old granny came up and started berating him over something that she didn’t like. He shocked her by saying, “Wait a minute! You can’t talk to me like that! I am your pastor and God put me here to lead you spiritually. You can’t talk to me with that tone of voice!” She meekly said, “I’m sorry.” Yaeger said he felt like slapping her on the backside and saying, “Now, get back into the game!”

7. **Authority is exercised in the local church through teaching and correcting with God’s Word.**

Sometimes (hopefully, rarely) the elders must take correction to the level of public church discipline (I will deal with this further
when we come to Titus 3:10-11). When that happens, the church must submit to the discipline by breaking fellowship with the sinning member (1 Cor. 5:1-13).

But, for now note that the man of God must teach the Word of God with all authority. This does not mean beating people over the head with dogmatic views on minor issues. But it does mean that when the Bible clearly commands something, the preacher must not dodge the command or teach it as a helpful hint for happy living. It is the Word of the living God, and it must be preached as His commandment, not as an optional opinion that you may want to consider. Both the preacher and the congregation are under the same authority of the Word. If it steps on your toes, it probably stepped on mine while I was studying the text for the message. We all must obey God’s Word.

**Conclusion**

Here are some questions to ask yourself to apply the concept of biblical authority:

First, do I have a settled commitment to submit to God’s authority as revealed in His Word? Is Jesus truly my Lord? Selective obedience is really not obedience at all.

Second, am I under proper authority in the various God-ordained spheres? Do I submit to the government? What is my attitude in the church, at home, and at work? Am I only giving outward, grudging compliance, or am I obedient cheerfully from the heart?

Third, if I am in a position of authority, do I wrongly use it for selfish advantage or do I exercise it fearfully because of the responsibility before God?

Fourth, if I am in authority, do I lead with an air of superiority, or by humbly serving and blessing those I lead?

Fifth, if I am in authority, does my character elicit respect or does it undermine my leadership? Am I the first to obey the Word?

May we all take to heart the teaching of God’s Word about biblical authority! He is the supreme authority and we need to make sure that our hearts are in submission to Him.
Application Questions

1. Why is it important for everyone in authority to remember that he only holds a delegated authority?

2. Although God designed authority for our blessing and protection, He allows a lot of abusive authority to exist. Why would He do this? What can those under such authority learn?

3. When, if ever, is it right to rebel against abusive authority? What biblical guidelines apply?

4. What is the difference between teaching with true biblical authority and teaching with opinionated dogmatism?

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