

LESSON 11

Understanding Spiritual Authority

In this lesson, we will study what is known in many evangelical churches as “spiritual authority.” Some churches do a good job of dealing with spiritual authority, but others do not. In churches where the topic is not taught or discussed, some sincere followers of Christ remain ignorant of the biblical teaching on this important subject. These followers may then develop habits and attitudes that are detrimental to their own spiritual development and to the church family.

LESSON OUTLINE

Types of Authority
 Spiritual Authority Defined
 Submitting to Spiritual Authority
 Rebellion against Spiritual Authority
 Supporting the Local Church

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Identify the different kinds of authority that exist.*
2. *Define spiritual authority.*
3. *Explain what it means to submit to spiritual authority.*
4. *Discuss the nature of rebellion against spiritual authority.*
5. *Identify ways to support and help your church and its spiritual leaders.*

Types of Authority

Objective 1:

Identify the different kinds of authority that exist.

Authority is real. Each one of us submits to various kinds of authority on a daily basis. Let us identify five different kinds of authority that we are all familiar with. First is God's authority. Though God gave human beings free will and permits us a great deal of latitude in choosing the path we will follow, God is still the ultimate authority. He also holds people accountable for their thoughts, words, decisions, and actions. For example, as Christians we are called to submit unconditionally to Christ's divine authority. Jesus, just before returning to heaven, said to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Second, there is expert authority. A university professor who has spent many years researching and studying may be an expert or an authority on a subject. A famous soccer player or gymnast may be considered an authority in his or her chosen field of sports. A person may start out washing dishes in a restaurant, become a waiter, move up to cook, and finally be promoted to a managerial role. He or she knows the business on all levels. A wise person will learn from those with expertise.

Third, authority can be acquired through coercion, tyranny, abuse, and manipulation. The history books are filled with the examples of tyrants and dictators who rose to power through unscrupulous methods and ruled harshly and unfairly over their people. Christians who must live in countries where leaders abuse authority often suffer because of the ungodly behavior of those in power. The apostle Peter writes, "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20). Before you go on, read 1 Peter 3:13–17 also.

Fourth, there is delegated authority. For example, a storeowner may delegate to a certain employee the task of supervising the newest workers hired. A pastor of a church may ask one of the members to head up an outreach ministry or a children's program. As believers, we may receive this kind of authority from time to time or be required to submit to it.

Fifth, there is entrusted authority. Examples of this kind of authority would include police and elected officials. Societies entrust them with authority to protect citizens, enforce the laws of the land, and seek the best interests of the population. Such authority may not be perfect, but according to the New Testament, Christians are commanded to submit to civil authorities so long as they are not being asked to violate God's higher moral law. Before you go on, read Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17.

Spiritual Authority Defined

Objective 2:

Define spiritual authority.

In the Christian context, spiritual authority refers to the God-established offices or positions of authority within the church, the body of Christ. In Ephesians 4:11–13, Paul writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

The five offices or roles mentioned above—apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher—are sometimes referred to as the five-fold ministry offices. Most Christians best relate to the office of pastor and teacher. If you are a Christian, you probably have gotten to know a pastor or Bible teacher. In fact, many biblical scholars say that the Greek of the Ephesians 4:11 indicates that these two offices are actually one combined office—the pastor/teacher. Every local church needs at least one leader who fulfills this role. The Bible is very clear about the qualifications and responsibilities of the pastor/teacher. The New Testament also refers to the pastor/teacher as “elder” and “overseer.” Please take time now to read 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and 1 Peter 5:1–4.

Notice that those who hold the office of pastor/teacher have a specific function. Their express purpose is to prepare God’s people for service and help them mature in the faith. This does not mean they are God’s favorites—simply that they are called, divinely equipped, and given responsibility to teach and preach, care for and lead their fellow believers. The authority these leaders possess to do that job is delegated by Christ himself. It is not conferred upon them by humans. However, there is no doubt that, within the local church

context, it takes time for believers to get to know and trust their pastors and teachers.

While many countries function well as democracies, giving their citizens many rights and privileges, the church, both universal and local, is not really a democracy. This may come as a shock to you! This is not to say that individual Christians cannot voice their opinions or endeavor to bring about positive change in their local assemblies. Indeed, it is good when they do. Nor does this imply that only pastors hear from God. God speaks to the hearts of all truly committed believers. Nor does it mean that only pastors and teachers can have an active ministry. The truth is that all believers should be active, serving God, using their talents, abilities, and resources.

When we say that the church is not a democracy, we mean that it is ultimately led by God who guides and uses its spiritual leaders to promote His agenda. The church's spiritual leaders, in turn, serve and work with believers to advance God's purpose and plan. It is vital to understand that the spiritual direction a local church takes is dependent upon the vision and plans God reveals to its pastor and the leadership team. They pray about and discuss the plans thoroughly to make sure they are accurately discerning God's voice; then they implement them.

Also, spiritual leaders like the pastor/teacher are entrusted by God with the responsibility of fearlessly preaching the Word of God, correcting any false teaching, rebuking when necessary, and helping those who have fallen and need restoration. Take time now to read 2 Timothy 4:1–5.

Submitting to Spiritual Authority

Objective 3:

Explain what it means to submit to spiritual authority.

Hebrews 13:17 commands believers: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

What does it mean for a Christian to submit to spiritual authority? Sometimes it is helpful to define something by pointing out what it does not mean. For instance, submission to spiritual authority does not mean that the believer becomes a slave, mindlessly obeying the commands of those in authority. No pastor/teacher or any other church leader should ever require that. If they do, it is a sure sign that they have become unbalanced and are not demonstrating true godly attitudes about their leadership.

Submission does not mean you unconditionally accept everything you are told, either. Every believer has the right and responsibility to evaluate what he or she is told, using the Bible as his or her standard. Under no circumstance should you participate in behavior that is contrary to the moral guidelines given in God's revealed Word—no matter who tells you to do it.

True submission, first of all, is an attitude of the heart. It speaks of humility. A submissive person understands that he or she still depends on God and others. A submissive person recognizes that God has established leaders who have helpful insights and godly wisdom to share. Believers do well to understand that they need to be connected to God and other Christians, including their leaders, to reach their full potential.

Submission is also behavioral. A submissive person shows proper respect for those in authority, bearing in mind their role (or office) and calling from God, giving due consideration to advice, correction, suggestions, and requests. In the body of Christ, compliance with spiritual authority is not to be forced or coerced. Believers respond to their leaders in joyful cooperation.

Though most Christians are grateful for and respectful of those in leadership, certain people find it difficult to accept this teaching on spiritual authority. Here are some common reasons for their reluctance:

First, some individuals do not submit willingly to any authority. Perhaps they were rebels as children and teenagers, and they have carried over into adult life attitudes and behaviors that are unscriptural, unhealthy,

and harmful to all good relationships. Such people first need to submit to God and ask Him to change their hearts.

Second, some people have been hurt by unscrupulous church leaders, and now they are suspicious of anyone who exercises authority in the body of Christ. Though the majority of born-again, Spirit-filled church leaders really do love God, desire to serve Christ, and want the best for His church, pastors and other spiritual leaders are still human and fallible. Sometimes they err. At times a small number commit serious sin and bring unspeakable pain to Christians and dishonor to God. They may misuse their position of influence to advance selfish interests. They may err doctrinally and become unbalanced, promoting unscriptural practices or teaching. They may become power hungry, attempt to suppress all criticism, and rule over their congregations like an oppressive king over his subjects. Some form of Christian counseling would be recommended for people hurt by abusive church leaders. Counseling can help heal these wounds and eliminate bitterness and resentment. Those who have been hurt need compassion, understanding, and help in finding a loving church and pastor with whom to associate.

Third, some people disagree strongly with their church leaders on certain issues and assume it is acceptable to resist them on all issues. For instance, they may say to their pastor, "You have authority as long as I agree with you. When I disagree, your spiritual authority is forfeited." These parishioners need to be shown the fallacy of such a position. The Bible does not teach that everybody in the church is always going to agree on all issues. It does teach that believers must love each other, promote peace, forgive, and seek to build the unity of the body of Christ.

Fourth, some people resent the success or recognition certain church leaders have acquired. This is jealousy, and it is condemned as sinful in God's Word. The apostle Paul notes, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and ... jealousy" (Galatians 5:19–20).

Fifth, some people reject the spiritual authority in their church because of their leader's age, race, educational

background, or other personal matters. This, too, is unscriptural behavior. Galatians 3:26–28 says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Sixth, some individuals are simply angry at God. They blame God for the painful things they experienced. They may even blame God for the consequences of the foolish choices they made in life. Though such individuals often find their way into the local church and begin recovery, it may be difficult at times for them to appreciate and trust the spiritual authority invested in the pastors and teachers.

Seventh, it is unfortunate but true that some Christians become unduly proud. They think they are more spiritual, righteous, or wise than their spiritual leaders. Certainly, it is possible and desirable for all believers to have great depth of spirituality, to be knowledgeable of the Bible, to live exemplary, godly lives, and to possess wisdom. However, true humility keeps Christians from flaunting their achievements in the face of others or putting others down. People who become unduly proud and criticize spiritual leaders for perceived weakness are not walking in love and are forgetting that God chooses whom He will for leadership. Moreover, everyone, including church leaders, is a work in progress.

Eighth, some individuals in church are not really born again. Though they act like believers at times, they often demonstrate worldly attitudes and behaviors, including disrespect for and disregard of spiritual leaders.

Rebellion against Spiritual Authority

Objective 4:

Discuss the nature of rebellion against spiritual authority.

Our sinful world is full of rebellion. Jails and prisons are full of men and women who decided they were not subject to the laws of the land or God. Most never expect to be caught breaking the law. They imagined they were smarter

than everybody else. However, the Bible warns, “You may be sure that your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23). No one can rebel against God or society forever. People who live in rebellion against God and humankind go from one disastrous situation to the next. Ultimately, they must still answer to God when this life is over. Romans 14:10 promises that “we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.”

Sadly, even in the church rebellion can occur, and it takes many forms. A believer who is not careful to stay close to God through prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship with other believers may get entangled in sinful and worldly activities. A Christian may begin to harbor unforgiveness toward someone and develop a bitter spirit. A follower of Christ may allow disillusionment or disappointment in life, within the church, or with a church leader to foster a negative attitude against that pastor. A Christian may even foolishly engage in senseless gossip or malicious criticism of God’s people and leaders. Unchecked, this will produce pain in the local church and the life of its leaders, thus hampering their effectiveness.

In the Old Testament is the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The miracle-filled story does not end there. God used Moses for forty years to lead the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. He was not only a prophet, but also their shepherd or pastor. Many times the people lost patience, engaged in sinful behavior, and lashed out at Moses and his brother Aaron with unjustified criticism and murmuring. Notice the response Moses gave on one occasion when the Israelites became angry and criticized everything Moses and Aaron were doing. Moses told the people, “Who are we, that you should grumble against us? ... You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord” (Exodus 16:7–8).

When a believer willfully and stubbornly rebels against the spiritual authority God has placed in the church, it is an act of rebellion against God. This is a strong statement that is supported in Scripture. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and

whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me” (John 13:20). Likewise, whoever rejects anyone Jesus sends, not only rejects the messenger but also rejects Jesus. This is not a good position to be in for one who claims to be a Christian. Ongoing rebellion against spiritual authority is equivalent to rebellion against God.

This does not suggest, however, that pastors and other spiritual leaders have the right to do and say anything they want. They, too, are accountable to God and others who are over them in the Lord. James says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). God holds spiritual leaders to a higher standard of accountability.

However, no Christian should ever want to find himself or herself in the position of fighting against one of God’s chosen leaders. It is clear from Scripture that those who fight against their leaders actually fall into the devil’s trap. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, a spiritual leader of the church in Ephesus, saying,

And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

Supporting the Local Church

Objective 5:

Identify ways to support and help your church and its spiritual leaders.

There are several ways for Christians to support their local church. First, Christians must be faithful to attend church services and participate in the life of the church.

Hebrews 10:24–25 tell us, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Some people underestimate the value of being present when God’s people meet. Joining together with others encourages us and heartens the spiritual leaders who have prayed and prepared many hours to minister to us. We also need to do more than merely show up and sit like robots. We can be friendly, participate in the worship, and encourage the preacher with “Amen” when he or she makes a good point in the message.

Second, we must pray. Certain things, even good things, may seem more important or exciting than prayer. Some people love to play a musical instrument. Others live for evangelism. Still others thrive on helping the needy. Certain people even enjoy doing physical labor as service to the Lord. However, let us never forget that it is the duty of every Christian to pray. Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” In particular, we must pray for our spiritual leaders. You may find this hard to accept, but spiritual leaders face temptations and spiritual conflicts just as the rest of us do. The devil knows that if he can topple spiritual leaders or discourage them enough to quit, it will have a domino effect on the rest of the church. You can be a tremendous help by praying fervently for your pastors and their families.

Third, as Christians, we must get to know our pastors and Bible teachers. In Ephesians 4, we learn that pastors and teachers are some of Christ’s gifts to the church. Jesus did not leave us buildings or money or technology. The Lord gave us people, called and equipped to love and bless His church. The more we know our leaders, the more we will likely come to trust them.

Fourth, we must hold our spiritual leaders in high esteem. Notice what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” God has seen fit to call our spiritual leaders

to the office they hold in the church. In secular society, it is not uncommon for unsaved people to act with belligerence or hostility toward leadership of any kind. Such disrespect might be toward their employer, the police, a city official, or national leadership. While such behavior may go on in secular society, there is no place for it in the Lord's church.

Fifth, Christians should help share ministry responsibilities. The Lord never intended for the whole ministry of the church to be carried solely by the pastor or a handful of people. It has been said all too often that ninety percent of the work in the church is done by ten percent of the church members. Sadly, this has caused the burnout of many outstanding workers. If every believer will participate in helping, serving, and giving, no one will be overburdened. Therefore, be willing to serve in your local church. "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:8). A great joy will be yours also as you discover and use your gifts.

In conclusion, this lesson is a challenging one because it introduces biblical concepts that may be unfamiliar to many people who have recently come to know Christ as Lord and Savior. However, the lesson is of great relevance to every believer. May you be the kind of Christian that is a joy to lead, and may God open doors for you to great things in His kingdom.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE:

Exodus 16:8

Matthew 28:18

John 13:20

Ephesians 4:11–13

1 Timothy 5:17

2 Timothy 2:24–26

2 Timothy 4:2

Hebrews 10:24–25

Hebrews 13:17

James 3:1

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully, and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *To have expert authority means*
 - a) *you can use influence or power any way you desire as long as you do not hurt anybody else.*
 - b) *someone delegated it to you to make sure you can help others.*
 - c) *people recognize that you acquired great knowledge and/or skills in a certain area.*
2. *Spiritual authority in this lesson refers to the authority*
 - a) *delegated by God to pastors and others called to lead in local churches.*
 - b) *that Christians have to tell others the Good News about Jesus.*
 - c) *that angels have as God's messengers.*
3. *Ephesians 4:11–13 talks about the gifts Christ has given to the church. These gifts include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
4. *The local church should be recognized as a democratic system.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
5. *Pastors receive authority from the Lord to implement divinely-inspired direction for the church, preach God's Word, correct false teaching, and help believers.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
6. *According to this lesson, submission to spiritual authority means*
 - a) *obeying everything a pastor tells you even when it does not make sense or agree with the Bible.*
 - b) *showing proper respect for those over you in the Lord.*
 - c) *taking a pilgrimage to a holy shrine and kissing the hand of a religious leader.*

7. *Among the reasons why some people find it difficult to respect spiritual authority, which response below is not one of the reasons covered in the lesson?*
 - a) *Some people have been hurt by unscrupulous church leaders.*
 - b) *Some people resist submitting to any kind of authority.*
 - c) *Some think it is acceptable to resist spiritual leaders on all issues just because they disagree on certain issues.*
 - d) *Some people believe submitting to pastors and other church leaders makes these leaders' work too easy.*
8. *What does the story of Moses facing the angry Israelites teach us about grumbling against spiritual authority?*
 - a) *Grumbling against God's servants is necessary and meets with God's approval.*
 - b) *Grumbling against God's servants is equivalent to grumbling against God.*
 - c) *Grumbling against God's servants is a form of protest that Jesus encouraged.*
 - d) *Grumbling is simply natural human behavior that God accepts.*
9. *Which response below is not mentioned in the lesson as a way to support your church?*
 - a) *Attend services and participate in the life of the church.*
 - b) *Help shoulder the responsibility in church.*
 - c) *Hold your spiritual leaders in high esteem.*
 - d) *Send anonymous letters to your spiritual leaders, telling them what they are doing wrong.*
10. *The subject of spiritual authority has very little relevance to the average Christian.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *c (11.1)*
2. *a (11.2)*
3. *a (11.2)*
4. *b (11.2)*
5. *a (11.2)*
6. *b (11.3)*
7. *d (11.3)*
8. *b (11.4)*
9. *d (11.5)*
10. *b (11.5)*

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