

SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITY - John Sweetman

In this article, John explores a basic leadership principle: "You cannot gain spiritual authority if you cannot submit to spiritual authority." This is a tough principle for younger leaders, but is actually fundamental to spiritual leadership.

When I first went to theological college (as a 25 year old), we always addressed our lecturers by their titles and stood up when they entered the room. There were numerous rules about what you could wear, when you had to study, and what you could do with your free time.

Thankfully, times have changed. As a principal, I would prefer to spend time mentoring students, than checking that they're studying at their desk at 8.00pm. These days personal freedom is prized and institutions and rules are regarded with suspicion. We've learned a lot about grace and trust in the last 50 years. We're sensitive to the dangers of power.

But what happens when you as a leader find yourself being asked to conform or submit? The challenge could come from a difficult supervisor, an antiquated church system, an obstinate partner, an unsympathetic team leader, or some set of rules or regulations.

You want to try something new in ministry or business and your leader says, "No." You don't want to run a program, but you are told that you must. You have vision that keeps getting blocked by the organisation. You are told to change a behaviour that you think is perfectly appropriate. The list goes on.

Submission is not a dirty word

Many young leaders feel that submission is a dirty word; that it shows lack of character and backbone. They think that when you submit, you are giving up your ideals and freedom; that you are better off walking away than weakly yielding.

I'm sympathetic, but I believe this is a huge and dangerous mistake. Here's my mantra (that's probably not the best word to use): "You cannot gain spiritual authority if you cannot submit to spiritual authority."

Okay I belong to a different generation, but don't write me off just yet. I'll try to explain and justify this fundamental leadership principle.

Submission grows spiritual authority

Here's my mantra: "You cannot gain spiritual authority if you cannot submit to spiritual authority." Let me try to explain my reasoning.

At the moment I'm reading through Romans. After working through the whole theology of grace, Paul writes: *"Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. Consequently, those who rebel against the authority are rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves [in other words, they will be in big trouble]."* Rom. 13:1-2.

Now submission to government is not all that hard to do in a nation with reasonably just laws like Australia. But the Roman empire was not at all friendly towards Christians who were often persecuted. So here is Paul encouraging Christians to submit to a heathen, antagonistic government.

In other places, Paul pushes submission to church leaders (Heb. 13:17), submission to parents (Eph. 6:1), and submission to husbands (Eph. 5:22).

The principle is this. God puts certain authorities in our lives (bosses, church leaders, governments, etc.). They are accountable to God for the exercise of this authority and our role is to submit. Now of course there will be extreme situations in which submission is not possible, but this does not negate the principle. In submitting to those in authority, we are submitting to God.

Do I like this? No, at least not when I disagree with the person in authority. I'm very happy to submit when those in authority agree with me. But when they make stupid decisions, or can't see my viewpoint, or push me around, or limit my creativity, or show their prejudices, or get hung up on the minutia, then everything in me says, "Why should I submit? It's just dumb."

And God says, "Do it! Submit! This is my worry not yours. I've put them there. Fight them and you're actually fighting me." And the strange thing is that as I humble myself and submit (often through gritted teeth), I actually gain respect and spiritual authority. It has something with the story Jesus told about those seeking the best seats getting demoted, and those putting themselves at the bottom, surprisingly finding themselves at the head of the table (Luke 14:8-11).

You can't gain spiritual authority if you cannot submit to spiritual authority. There's no way around this. Sorry.

What are the limits of submission?

I've had a number of queries about the extent to which the submission to authority principle applies. What about the persecuted church? What about the danger of abuse? What about little Hitlers in authority? There is plenty of historical evidence of the church not submitting to civil authority. Jesus did apparently submit to the Roman authorities, but he didn't generally submit to the Jewish leaders.

Now that I've firmly established the principle, let me talk about what I see as some exceptions to the rule of submission to authority.

1. *Injustice*. I'm not sure that we should be too concerned about personal injustice, but when submitting to authority will mean injustice for others, then we need to think very carefully. I would resist if our governing board wanted me to implement a policy that was unjust for our students.
2. *Abuse*. Some people are abusers and they need to be resisted. Those who would bully or misuse their authority for their own advantage are not acting responsibly in their God-given role. I'm not talking about those who make poor calls or are somewhat difficult, but those who systematically abuse their power.
3. *Ethical compromise*. If the person in authority insists that you do something that compromises your moral values, you should resist. This is an important time to make a stand. Christians must be people of character.
4. *Violating core values*. We should not submit when submission would mean violating values that are at the core of our calling and life. However, be careful about this, because some people see everything with which they disagree as being a violation of their core values. If this is the case for you, it is likely that you're just strong-willed and spiritually immature, not principled.

So there are situations in which we cannot submit to authority. May God give you grace to submit when it goes against the grain, and wisdom and courage to resist when this is God's call on you.

A personal case study

So what does submission to spiritual authority look like in practice? Here is an example from my ministry.

I had been a youth pastor for three years when the church called a new senior pastor. He seemed like a nice older guy and I was keen to have someone to work with again after being by myself for 12 months. The youth work was doing well (praise God) and I was a busy youth pastor.

At one of our first “staff meetings” (there was only the two of us), he asked me about my policies for weddings. I was taking lots of weddings seeing we had a large young adult population and had a fairly easy-going attitude to them - really the couple could pretty well do anything they wanted, within reason.

He said, “I don’t want you to allow photos during your wedding ceremonies.” Now this was stupid and a little weird. To this day I have no idea why he felt this way. Maybe he had had a bad experience with a photographer at a wedding and had decided to ban all photographs to prevent it ever happening again.

I didn’t have a chance to say much at the time, but I brewed over it all week and the more I thought about it the more ridiculous his request became. My objections were numerous - weddings were private affairs not church services, I was responsible for them not him, couples loved to have photos of the ceremony, I already had established my wedding policies, the Bible said something about wine at weddings but nothing about photos, etc. By our next staff meeting, I was prepared.

I started on my list of objections and was about half way through the second one when he said, “John, you’re not to allow photos during your wedding services and that’s that.” I was flabbergasted. How ridiculous! And he wouldn’t even discuss it.

So what did I do? Well I submitted. It took all my grace, because I was a strong young man and wasn’t used to being told what to do. But I submitted. I knew he was wrong. But I submitted.

Let me just check in hindsight if submitting was the right thing to do. Was I under his spiritual authority? Yes. Did it involve injustice to others? Maybe some couples were baffled when I told them, but it wasn’t really an injustice. Was it abuse? I didn’t like it and he should have consulted, but not really (unless it became a pattern). Did it involve ethical compromise on my part? No. Did it violate my core values? Well photos at weddings were important to me, but I couldn’t really call them a core value.

So while I didn’t like it at all, I think I did the right thing.

You know I can’t remember another issue where this senior pastor put any boundaries on my ministry in the next six years of working together. I think he knew that I would submit if it came to the crunch. He trusted me.

Let me repeat for the last time, “You will not gain spiritual authority if you cannot submit to spiritual authority.” This is such an important Christian leadership principle. Learn it while you’re young.

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