

BEYOND AUTHORITY  
AND SUBMISSION

WOMEN AND MEN  
IN MARRIAGE,  
CHURCH,  
AND SOCIETY

RACHEL GREEN MILLER

Rachel Miller writes as a conservative who loves Scripture and happily sits under its authority. She calls us to examine ourselves against Scripture, not to remove ourselves from its authority in our lives, and gives us diagnostic tools from the Word to renovate our understanding of men and women in the church, in the home, and in society at large.

Rachel teaches the history of views on sex and gender in secular cultures and then shows us the ways that some evangelical teaching on the sexes is built more on secular philosophy than on biblical truth. In the end, while historical context sheds great light on the Scriptures, Rachel wins us with Scripture itself. She offers us a well-researched survey of Scripture on biological sex and gender that will inspire and aid readers to gain a biblical vision of men and women working in unity and interdependence in God's kingdom.

—**Wendy Alsup**, Author, *Is the Bible Good for Women? Seeking Clarity and Confidence Through a Jesus-Centered Understanding of Scripture*

Most of the Christians I know want to be the men and women of God. But what does that mean, exactly? Who's in charge? Who gets the final say? What does it mean to be *masculine* or *feminine*? Enter Rachel G. Miller and her new book, *Beyond Authority and Submission*. In these pages, you'll find a compelling vision for how men and women can work together unfettered by social and historical expectations. Tracing the broader themes of Scripture, with careful attention to theology and the text, Miller calls men and women alike to live in the fullness of all that God has made us to be.

—**Hannah Anderson**, Author, *Made for More: An Invitation to Live in God's Image*

Rachel Miller has written an excellent book on men and women that honors the Bible's position while avoiding extremes. Highly recommended!

—**Todd S. Bordow**, Pastor, Cornerstone Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Houston; Author, *What Did Jesus Really Say about Divorce?*

Rachel Miller has done an excellent job of bringing clarity and discernment to a discussion that is often emotionally charged and contentious. Biblically reasoned, confessionally informed, and drawing from the

resources of church history, Miller’s work cuts through rhetoric and assumptions to show us that sometimes ideas that are labeled “biblical” can in fact be loaded with cultural notions. While much of the contemporary discussion about “gender roles” focuses primarily on authority and submission—who is allowed to do what?—Miller shows that there is a need for us to go beyond this narrow focus and instead promote unity, interdependence, and service. She invites readers not to ignore or dismiss Scripture but to go deeper in their understanding of its meaning and implications. In *Beyond Authority and Submission*, many Apolloses have the opportunity to listen and learn from a wise Priscilla.

—**Jacob Denhollander**, PhD Student, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary

Rachel challenges popular yet extrabiblical and unbiblical beliefs about women and men and what roles are considered appropriate for them in marriage, the church, and society. However, she doesn’t simply offer a critique. She also sets forth a compelling, gospel-centered vision of biblical manhood and womanhood that centers on unity, interdependence, and service. The gospel is to be paramount in all things, which includes issues of manhood and womanhood. Rachel makes this crystal clear. Men and women are co-image-bearers, co-heirs in Christ, and co-laborers for the gospel. We are different from each other, and yet we need each other. I heartily recommend this book!

—**John Fonville**, Pastor (Anglican Church in North America),  
Paramount Church, Jacksonville, Florida

*Beyond Authority and Submission* is a fascinating and eye-opening look at womanhood and the extent to which historical tradition, rather than the Bible, has defined what Christians believe about womanhood. This book will encourage readers to be Bereans—to turn to Scripture as their sole authority. May Rachel’s book serve to bring more unity in marriages and the church as we seek to co-labor with one another for the good of the gospel and the building up of Christ’s church.

—**Christina Fox**, Speaker; Author, *Sufficient Hope: Gospel Meditations and Prayers for Moms*; Content Editor, *enCourage*

Rachel Miller writes with her characteristic verve and wisdom as she addresses the vexed subject of women and men—a subject on which there is often more heat than light. If we are to follow the Bible when it says we should be slow to speak and quick to listen, then this is one such occasion on which we would be wise to listen well. She has made a valuable contribution to the discussion of how we negotiate between the extremes of patriarchy and feminism in the church today. Her arguments deserve to be taken seriously and weighed well as we seek to be faithful to Scripture in our generation.

—**Liam Goligher**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church,  
Philadelphia

When James reminds us of God’s requirement to live unstained by the world, he is giving us a near impossible task. The Christian religion carries thousands of years of cultural baggage that has accumulated as an inevitable consequence of our human frailty. In taking on our theology of men and women, Rachel Miller leads us back to our roots—to our salvation and freedom in Jesus Christ.

—**Valerie Hobbs**, Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University  
of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

In this extremely practical and helpful book, Rachel Green Miller peels back layer after layer of what she describes as “unbiblical and extrabiblical beliefs” that have created a competitive and antagonistic environment between men and women in the church. She then casts a vision for what life could be when men and women work together toward unity, interdependence, and service, all while inhabiting the God-ordained roles that Scripture lays out for the family of God. I, too, long for a church that is full of grace, forgiveness, and mercy, and this book has given me many things to think about as I carry out my role as director of spiritual formation. I highly recommend this book to anyone who desires to see our churches filled with co-laborers for the kingdom of God.

—**Abby Ross Hutto**, Author, *God for Us: Discovering the Heart of the Father through the Life of the Son*

The debate that rages about men and women is full of history, rhetoric, and labels. Rachel Miller takes us on a remarkable journey that navigates us away from the hyperbole and man-made traditions and sets our feet solidly on the Scriptures. This book desperately needed to be written, and Rachel has done so brilliantly—with insight, clarity, sobriety, and love.

—**Sam Powell**, Pastor, First Reformed Church, Yuba City, California

Rachel Miller sets out to peel back some of the layers of extrabiblical and cultural assumptions about the nature of men and women in the home, church, and society. She succeeds at engaging her sources critically, with an incisive yet reader-friendly style. This book will help to tease out some of your own lingering doubts about the usefulness of rigid gender stereotypes. Expect to learn from history, to have your assumptions questioned, and to become better equipped to engage more thoughtfully with this important topic, regardless of whether you call yourself egalitarian, complementarian, or anything else!

—**Eowyn Stoddard**, Missionary, Mission to the World

There is a very real danger, in our current cultural moment, that the polarization that characterizes the political landscape might well come to exert an unfortunate influence on both the rhetoric and the content of discussions among Christians on a number of controversial topics. The temptation to respond to one extreme error by adopting its mirror image is strong but rarely—if ever—correct. And there are few topics in the public square that are more divisive than the relationship between the sexes. It is therefore a pleasure to commend this book by Rachel Miller, which eschews the cheap extremism and bombastic rhetoric that characterize conservative Christian responses to feminism and instead plots not a middle way but a biblical way through the subjects of authority, submission, masculinity, and the like. She is not interested in making the Bible fit 1950s ideals of what men and women should be; rather, she wants to help the reader to think about what the Bible actually means in the present. This is a refreshingly sane read.

—**Carl Trueman**, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania

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RACHEL GREEN MILLER

  
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For Matt, my strongest encouragement—  
yesterday, today, and forever.

*“My beloved is mine, and I am his.” (Song 2:16)*

And for Jonathan, Gabriel, and Nathanael—  
God has given me the desires of my heart.

*“He gives the barren woman a home,  
making her the joyous mother of children.”  
(Ps. 113:9 ESV)*



# CONTENTS

Foreword by Aimee Byrd	7
Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	13

## PART 1: A LENS FOR OUR RELATIONSHIPS

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. “Mutuality of Respect and Love”<br><i>What Are Authority and Submission?</i>             | 21 |
| 2. “Hand in Hand, Eye to Eye, Heart in Heart”<br><i>Unity, Interdependence, and Service</i> | 35 |

## PART 2: WOMEN AND MEN IN HISTORY

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 3. “The General Inferiority of the Female Sex”<br><i>Women and Men in Greco-Roman Society</i>                  | 47 |
| 4. “The Angel in the House”<br><i>Women and Men in the Victorian Era</i>                                       | 61 |
| 5. “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men”<br><i>The First-Wave Feminist Movement</i>                           | 77 |
| 6. “The 1960s’ Women’s Movement Was Hijacked”<br><i>Later Feminism and the Conservative Christian Response</i> | 89 |

Contents

PART 3: THE NATURE OF WOMEN AND MEN	
7. “She Was Not His Equal”	105
<i>Prevalent Teaching on the Nature of Women and Men</i>	
8. “She Girds Herself with Strength”	123
<i>The Bible on the Nature of Women</i>	
9. “Let Your Gentle Spirit Be Known to All”	139
<i>The Bible on the Nature of Men</i>	
PART 4: WOMEN AND MEN IN MARRIAGE	
10. “King in His Home”	153
<i>Prevalent Teaching on Marriage</i>	
11. “A True Friend”	167
<i>The Bible on Marriage</i>	
12. “Bringing Marriage Back to Earth”	179
<i>Applying Biblical Truths to Marriage</i>	
PART 5: WOMEN AND MEN IN CHURCH	
13. “Masculine Piety”	193
<i>Prevalent Teaching on Women and Men in the Church</i>	
14. “Not Second-Class Citizens”	205
<i>The Bible on Women and the Church</i>	
15. “Rediscover the Ministry That Christ Has Ordained”	217
<i>What Male Ordination Does and Doesn’t Mean</i>	
PART 6: WOMEN AND MEN IN SOCIETY	
16. “God-Ordained Social Roles”	229
<i>Prevalent Teaching on Women and Men in Society</i>	
17. “The Daughters of Zelophehad Are Right”	243
<i>The Bible on Women and Men in Society</i>	
Conclusion	255
Select Bibliography	261

## FOREWORD

Rachel Miller is the perfect person to write this timely book that challenges the lens that many in the church use to view the nature of men and women and their so-called roles in the church, home, and society. In the last thirty years, the church has been flooded with resources on biblical manhood and womanhood. I remember reading many of these resources when I first married, wanting to be a godly wife and to properly respond to the sexual revolution that is pervading our culture. I learned about some new movements in the church, such as complementarianism and egalitarianism, that worked to build a framework for what the Bible teaches regarding masculinity, femininity, and the contributions of men and women. These movements became polarizing for those who joined their councils, coalitions, and alliances, as their positions were taught as gospel truths. I found myself in an evangelical subculture that built a framework of authority and submission to describe the nature of men and women. Is this really what the Bible teaches? While looking for some fellow critical thinkers, I discovered Rachel's blog, *A Daughter of the Reformation*. Her writing is a breath of fresh air.

Rachel is a laywoman. Maybe you are wondering what qualifies her to write such a book, when there are so many distinguished pastors and scholars who have written on the topic of biblical manhood and womanhood. There are several reasons why an informed laywoman like Rachel has much to contribute to this discussion.

First of all, Rachel has firm convictions about upholding the ordination of qualified men in the church and about husbands being servant leaders in their homes. While not aligning with a movement, Rachel does want to contribute as a complementary, reciprocal voice in response to the many we have read and heard. So she is what we would consider a reforming voice within her own camp. If complementarianism truly is complementary, it should value this kind of engagement. Published resources for the church are meant to be thoughtfully engaged. Most authors do not presume to be the final voice on matters such as these; rather, they aim to offer their interpretation of pertinent scriptural principles in hopes to move forward in a biblical understanding of the sexes. Rachel's book is a sharpening response from the pew.

Second, Rachel has nothing to personally gain. She is not aligned with any organization that will boost her status or career in exchange for her offering a biblical way to view men and women beyond authority and submission. In fact, her speaking against the grain of many of her peers is a brave endeavor. One reason why it is so difficult to have these discussions is because most of the authors are aligned to organizations that make their livelihood dependent on not budging from the organization's framework. Since Rachel is an ordinary laywoman, a faithful Christian who upholds the confessions of her church, and is not on the payroll of a parachurch organization, she has more freedom to write from the conclusions of her historical research and biblical convictions. Perhaps instead I should say that she has nothing to lose. But, just like the subject she is writing on, it's a little more complicated than that. Writing against the accepted grain in your own circles comes with a price. Rachel has counted the cost and cares enough about the way men and women co-labor together to write this book.

And third, Rachel has already proven to be a discerning and helpful voice on men and women in the church. Before the infamous Trinity debate that kicked off in 2016,<sup>1</sup> Rachel Miller was writing articles on her blog, challenging the orthodoxy of the prevalent teaching on the eternal

1. See "Highlights on the Trinity Debate," The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, accessed May 20, 2019, <http://www.alliancenet.org/trinity-debate>.

subordination of the Son and its sister teaching, the eternal subordination of women. Rachel has followed the doctrine on authority and submission in the Godhead and between the sexes, and has challenged its biblical grounds, before many of the scholars or pastors in her camp would speak out. Thankfully, we are now seeing a renewal of focus and resources being published on an orthodox teaching of the Trinity.

I am thankful for Rachel's further contributions in this book, as she examines whether some of the ideas about the nature of men and women and our relationships in the home, church, and society are biblical traditions that have been faithfully handed down or are ones that the church has picked up from the Greeks, Romans, and Victorians. Are our assumptions biblical or cultural? What if, in its attempt to be a Christian voice in response to the sexual revolution of the culture, the church has inadvertently been arguing from a different secular position? Should our framework for men and women be authority and submission, or can we return these categories to their proper place while recovering a lens of unity, interdependence, and service for both men and women?

Maybe Rachel didn't foresee just how fitting it would be when she named her blog *A Daughter of the Reformation*. She lives according to the Reformation confessions that she upholds. One of those cries is *Semper Reformanda*—the church is always reforming. We continually need to align our teachings with the authority of the Scriptures. This is something all readers should be able to agree with. I commend this book to you as a valuable contribution to the continuing discussion on the nature, relationships, and value of men and women, with the expectation that it will be a catalyst for fruitful, biblical reform.

Aimee Byrd



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since I was a little girl, I've dreamed of writing a book. It's a blessing to see my dream become a reality, and I'm thankful for all those who have had a part in making this book possible.

In particular, I'd like to thank my husband, Matt, for being a constant source of encouragement and prayer and for being my calm in the storm. I love you more each day. I'd also like to thank my boys, Jonathan, Gabriel, and Nathanael, for their support and love. They have celebrated each milestone in the book process with me.

My parents, Jon and Carolyn, have always been supportive and encouraging. They taught me to love the Lord and to cherish the Word. They also faithfully modelled the beauty of companionship in marriage. I am so thankful for you both.

Every writer needs friends who are willing to listen and give honest feedback. Aimee Byrd and Valerie Hobbs are my "kindred spirits." Thank you for being my friends and for your support. It means the world to me.

I'd like to thank the team at P&R Publishing for giving me this opportunity. Thank you, Amanda and Kristi, for your work in polishing my words and making this book what it is. I appreciate your help and kindness.

Thank you to my friends both online and in the real world. Your support and encouragement have brightened my day and given me the push to continue.

*Acknowledgments*

Lastly, I want to thank the writers, pastors, elders, leaders, and ordinary church members who stand up for the truth of the gospel and are willing to contend for the faith. You give me hope for the future of the church. May God make us all faithful co-laborers in Christ.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

# INTRODUCTION

*Our theological views about creation, gender, and the household context affect the way we think about women's status, roles, and contributions to the church, home, and society.*

AIMEE BYRD<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, my parents have renovated several homes. One house had pink flamingo wallpaper. Another had worn shag carpeting that unnerved our dog. But my favorite was a house that had a horrible old carpet throughout the living room. Imagine our surprise and joy when we found beautiful hardwood floors underneath it.

Whenever a house has something beautiful hidden like that, I invariably ask, “Why would anyone cover this up?!” The truth is that things like hardwood can take work to maintain, so sometimes they’re covered up because carpet seems easier to handle. Other times, things like plastic couch covers are added to a house to protect the wood or furniture. But most of the time, the layers inside a house reflect changing styles. What’s fashionable today is outdated tomorrow. Once you peel back the layers of dated wallpaper, ancient carpet, dirt and grime, and chipped paint, you begin to see the timeless beauty of a house.

1. Aimee Byrd, *No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), 13.

## A CONCERNING SITUATION

In a similar way, our theology runs the risk of being trendy. This is particularly true of our beliefs about women and men. Sometimes we add a layer or two to our theology because we think our man-made rules are easier to keep. Other times we add hedges to it as a reaction to what's going on in our culture and as a protection for what we believe. Over time, we end up with layers and layers of extrabiblical and even unbiblical ideas that cover up what the Bible teaches.

That's why I wrote this book. I've become increasingly aware of what's being taught in conservative circles about the nature of women and men and what's considered appropriate in marriage, the church, and society. It's troubling, and much of it isn't biblical. In addition, I see that authority and submission have become *the* lens through which all of women's and men's interactions are viewed—even to the point that some people try to figure out if it's okay for a woman to write a book that a man may learn from. Does a woman's authorship create a “direct, authoritative confrontation” that could be compromising?<sup>2</sup>

Maybe you've noticed these kinds of discussions too. Maybe you can't put your finger on what's bothering you. You may be concerned or confused—or both—by what you're hearing. You may wonder where these ideas come from. If so, this book is for you.

Why? Because as theologically conservative Christians, we must acknowledge where extrabiblical and unbiblical ideas about women and men have permeated, weakened, and confused our teachings. We need to move beyond a focus on authority and submission in order to incorporate equally important biblical themes into our discussions, such as unity, interdependence, and service. As we do, we will strengthen our vital relationship as co-laborers in Christ.

2. John Piper, “Do You Use Bible Commentaries Written by Women?” *Desiring God*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/do-you-use-bible-commentaries-written-by-women>. Piper concludes that this is acceptable. “‘She is not looking at me and confronting me and authoritatively directing me as a woman.’ There is this interposition of the phenomenon called *book* and *writing* that puts the woman as author out of the reader's sight and, in a sense, takes away the dimension of her female personhood.”

## WHO BELIEVES WHAT?

In discussions about men, women, and gender, various labels describe the different beliefs that Christians hold. The most common ones are *feminism*, *egalitarianism*, *complementarianism*, and *patriarchy*. At this point, you may be curious about where I fit in.

If you considered the four positions on a continuum, feminism would be on one end of the spectrum and patriarchy on the other. These two views of men and women are fundamentally opposed and have very little or no overlap. We will go into greater detail about the evolution of the feminist movement, but for the purposes of this discussion, feminism promotes the equality of women, believes that men and women are virtually interchangeable, and may prefer feminine pronouns and names for God. On the other extreme, patriarchal beliefs emphasize the differences between women and men and show a strong preference for male authority in all aspects of life.

That leaves us with the two middle-ground positions. Egalitarians believe that men and women are fundamentally equal but not interchangeable, and that they should “share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world.”<sup>3</sup> Complementarians believe that women and men are “equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood” and that “distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order.”<sup>4</sup>

So which am I? I believe that

- God made humans, male and female, in His own image (see Gen. 1:26–27)
- in Christ, men and women are equal before God (see Gal. 3:28)
- women and men are interdependent and should serve each other (see 1 Cor. 11:11–12)

3. “CBE’s Mission and Values,” Christians for Biblical Equality International, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/content/cbes-mission>.

4. “Danvers Statement,” The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement>.

- marriage was designed to be between one man and one woman—ideally for life (see Gen. 2:24)
- husbands are called to sacrificial, servant leadership of their wives and to love them as Christ loves the church (see Eph. 5:25–33)
- wives are called to yield voluntarily to their husbands—to submit to them as the church submits to Christ (see Eph. 5:22–24)
- only qualified men should be ordained leaders in the church (see 1 Tim. 3:1–13)

If you notice what I believe about marriage and ordination, you'll see that I'm not a feminist or an egalitarian. And I'm not patriarchal. So am I complementarian? I used to think so. After all, I believe that husbands are the leaders of their families. I believe that wives should submit to the leadership of their husbands. I believe that ordained church leaders should be qualified men. Isn't that what complementarians believe?

Yes, but that's not all that complementarians are expected to believe. The complementarian movement has done good things: affirming the complementarity and equality of men and women, affirming that husbands are to lead their wives sacrificially and that wives are to submit to the leadership of their husbands, and affirming the ordination of qualified men. But extrabiblical and unbiblical ideas have been incorporated into the movement's teaching as well. These ideas have more in common with Greek, Roman, and Victorian beliefs than with the Bible.

Not all who call themselves complementarians share these beliefs. However, because complementarianism as a movement has embraced these ideas, I'm not comfortable with calling myself a complementarian. If you are concerned as well, know that you're not alone.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The topics of sex and gender are everywhere. Conservative Christian books, articles, and conferences focus on answering questions about roles in marriage, biblical manhood and womanhood, biblical sexuality, purity before marriage, pornography and its effect on families, and responses to same-sex marriage, transgenderism, and a sexually saturated culture.

But not just conservative Christians are attempting to answer these questions. All around us, people debate what gender and sexuality mean. Bruce Jenner transitioned into Caitlyn. Fallon Fox, who was born a man, boxed against Tamikka Brents, who was born a woman, in a women's division match. Colleges ask which pronouns students prefer: *he?* *she?* *zhe?* Gender seems to mean everything and nothing.

As Christians, we need to speak out about what the Bible teaches about women and men, the definition of marriage, and the purposes and boundaries of sexuality. But we need to be very careful about what we say. Our society needs clear teaching from the Bible. That means that we need to study the Bible and allow the Scriptures to peel back any layers of unbiblical and extrabiblical beliefs we have added. Are we making things too hard and twisting ourselves up in knots? Is there a better way? I think there is.

What the Bible teaches about men, women, and gender is both simpler and more difficult than we are often told. The Bible doesn't give us detailed lists with bullet points to answer all our questions. Thankfully, it *does* give us guidelines and boundaries to help us know where to begin and how to address these topics.

We will first look at biblical themes that will help us in our discussions about women and men. Then we will look at how various historical cultures and developments have influenced our beliefs. In the second half of the book we will look at prevalent teachings about the nature of women and men and how these views affect our interactions in marriage, church, and society. We will also consider what the Bible teaches on these topics and how we can apply its truths to our lives.

I wrote this book because I care deeply about what the Bible teaches about women and men. My desire is for women and men to be co-laborers in all of life so that our families and churches will be strengthened and encouraged. Working together, we can then be a blessing to our society, which so desperately needs the truth of the gospel.



# PART 1

## A LENS FOR OUR RELATIONSHIPS



# 1

## “MUTUALITY OF RESPECT AND LOVE”

### WHAT ARE AUTHORITY AND SUBMISSION?

*The sorrow of the whole human story is not that we have authority,  
it is the way we have misused and neglected authority.*

ANDY CROUCH<sup>1</sup>

*Paul’s concept of “submission” contained notions of mutuality of  
respect and love and thus clearly transcended the secular notion.*

PHILIP TOWNER<sup>2</sup>

Imagine you are in World War II Germany. Nazi soldiers are banging on doors. The government is making people disappear. Friends and relatives have been sent away or are in hiding. You don’t know if you might be next. You live in fear of what could happen if you step out of line, even unintentionally. The terror is palpable.

1. Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 39.

2. Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 238.

Is that what authority is—raw power exercised without restraint or care for others? Consider the dystopian books and movies that are so popular in our culture: *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *1984*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. We're afraid of unbridled authority. After all, we live in a world that pursues freedom and independence. We've fought wars to protect and defend ourselves and others from tyranny and oppression. We're rugged individualists. No one tells us what to do, right?

But many conversations among Christians raise questions about authority and submission—especially when it comes to how women and men should interact. Why would wives submit to their husbands? Don't they have minds of their own? Are husbands supposed to have the last word when it comes to making decisions? If only men should be ordained in the church, does that mean that women have no say? We wonder about the meaning and purpose of authority and submission.

If we don't have a clear picture of how Scripture defines authority and submission, then we can't help but be confused. In this chapter, we will look at what the Bible teaches us about the nature of authority and submission and what authority and submission should look like in our lives.

## THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY AND SUBMISSION

Authority and submission aren't bad things in themselves. What bothers us, rightly, are the ways they have been abused. It's crucial that we separate out misuses of authority and submission from the biblical picture of godly authority and appropriate submission.

How do we do that? To start, we need to consider the nature of authority and submission. Where do authority and submission come from?

### **God: The Source of All Authority and Submission**

The foundation of a biblical understanding of authority and submission is the fact that we are humans, male and female, made in the image of God. In the beginning, God made us and gave us authority—the right to command and lead—over the rest of creation. He commanded us to rule over “every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This

authority is part of the very nature of humanity, and it is good when used appropriately.<sup>3</sup> God-honoring authority protects, cares for, provides for, and promotes the well-being of others.<sup>4</sup> In our fallen world, godly authority also restrains evil and punishes sin and wickedness (see Rom. 13:4). Life without authority is anarchy and chaos.

However, because we are created beings, our authority must be limited.<sup>5</sup> Only God has unlimited authority. He is God and our Creator. We are created and are not God (see Rom. 1:18–25). This contrast lies at the heart of submission and is essential for us to grasp. Submission—voluntarily yielding to the authority of another—isn’t feminine or masculine; it’s characteristic of our human nature.

Each of us has authority in some relationships and owes submission in others. Common sense tells us that we should recognize the situational authority of others. For example, when a doctor tells us that we have an illness and need treatment, it is wise for us to recognize his or her authority and to submit to the treatment. Similarly, we know we should follow the instructions of teachers, counselors, police officers, coaches, and even traffic signs. Additionally, the Bible gives us both general guidance and specific direction regarding authority and submission in particular relationships, as we will discuss.

### **Jesus Christ: Our Example for God-Honoring Authority**

In addition to submitting to God as our Creator, Christians are called to submit to Jesus Christ, because He is our Savior and head of the church (see Eph. 5:23–24). The apostle Paul writes that Jesus “is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:18).

All other authority in our lives is delegated, limited, and qualified. This is a necessary limitation, both because we aren’t God and because of our sinfulness.<sup>6</sup> But the submission of believers to Christ is ultimate.

3. See Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, 37–38.

4. See Crouch, 111–12.

5. See Crouch, 36.

6. See Steven R. Tracy, “What Does ‘Submit in Everything’ Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission,” *Trinity Journal* 29 (2008): 287.

There is no higher authority. Jesus Christ is God, and so He truly is our authority in every aspect of our lives.

Left to our own sinful natures, we tend to abuse power—but Jesus will never abuse His authority or sin against us. Godly authority is different from worldly authority. As Jesus taught His disciples, we are to lead by serving.

The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25–28)

While this kind of authority is often referred to as “servant leadership,” it’s a misunderstanding to think this means that leadership should be softened by servanthood. A servant leader isn’t so much a leader who learns to serve but a servant who learns to lead through service.<sup>7</sup> New Testament professor Michelle Lee-Barnewall writes, “Christ indicates that servanthood is a prerequisite for being a leader. Thus, rather than considering how servanthood modifies a type of leadership, it may be better to ask how servanthood forms a necessary basis for leadership, even authority.”<sup>8</sup>

What should servant leadership look like? Jesus. His life is the picture of humble service. He washed His disciples’ feet (see John 13:1–17). He served to the point of laying down His own life to pay for our sins.

### **Jesus Christ: Our Example for God-Honoring Submission**

In addition to being our model for God-honoring authority, Jesus Christ is the model of submission for all of us—male and female. He said, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of

7. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 138, NOOK.

8. Lee-Barnewall, 140.

Him who sent Me” (John 6:38), and the Bible gives us many examples of Jesus’s submission to the Father.

You may be wondering, since Jesus *is* God, how can He submit to God? Jesus is both God and human. As God, Jesus is equal in power, glory, and majesty with the Father. As a human, He has a human nature and a human will to submit in obedience to God the Father. When the Bible talks about Jesus’s submission or obedience, it refers to His human nature and will and His role as Mediator between God and humanity.

Before elaborating on specific relationships, Paul explains that we should be “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21 ESV). We do this, in part, by showing honor toward others, deferring to others, and considering the needs of others before our own (see Phil. 2:3–4). When we do these things, we follow Christ’s example. Christ submitted to God in His life, death, and resurrection and put the needs of His people before Himself. “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Whether we lead or follow, we are called to be like Christ. Is Christ’s authority an example exclusively for men? And is His example of submission just for women? No—both His God-honoring leadership and self-sacrificial submission are models for us all.

## AUTHORITY AND SUBMISSION IN OUR VARIOUS HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

In our homes, churches, and societies, we live and work within a variety of relationships. In some relationships, we are in authority. In others, we are called to submit.

The Westminster Larger Catechism uses the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” to explain the responsibilities that we have to each other in all our various relationships—not only our biological ones.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to those who are in authority over us, we are called to submit willingly and thankfully and without envy or contempt. When it comes to those who are under our authority, God calls us to love,

9. See the Westminster Larger Catechism, questions and answers 124–30.

counsel, protect, and provide. We should never demand sinful behavior or expect things that others aren't capable of doing. Submission doesn't mean mindlessly obeying reckless authority or sinful instructions. Having authority doesn't mean riding roughshod over others, getting our own way, or being harsh and demanding. It's about taking care of those who have been entrusted to us.

Will we ever submit and lead perfectly? Not this side of heaven. By God's grace and mercy, Christ's life and death cover our failures. But as we look at these different relationships we should remember that, no matter which side of the equation we're on, our authority and submission carry both responsibilities and limitations.

### **Authority and Submission in the Home**

The New Testament contains a handful of passages that describe how believers are to live together in households. Ephesians 5 and 6 is perhaps the most familiar of these passages. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul begins by instructing believers to submit to one another in Christ. Many English translations put a hard break between verse 21 and the rest of the chapter, but the Greek indicates that the passage is connected. Translated literally into English, the Greek text reads,

v. 21: submitting yourselves to one another in reverence of Christ<sup>10</sup>

v. 22: Wives to the[ir] own husbands as to the Lord<sup>11</sup>

Verse 22 doesn't have its own verb, meaning that the verses are intended to be understood together.<sup>12</sup> Paul explains that believers are to submit to one another before he outlines specific relationships that include aspects of authority and submission: wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters. In each of these relationships, Paul emphasizes

10. See Ephesians 5:21 in the Interlinear Bible, available online from Bible Hub, accessed June 12, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-21.htm>.

11. See Ephesians 5:22 in the Interlinear Bible, available online from Bible Hub, accessed June 12, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-22.htm>.

12. See Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 100.

service—caring for others by putting their needs first. As we will see, what each person owes another looks different in different types of relationships.

*Husbands and wives.* Paul writes that wives are to submit to their own husbands “as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). Some think this means that a wife should cater to her husband’s preferences—for example, that a husband can use his authority to tell his wife how to wash the dishes<sup>13</sup> and that if he wants his wife to get up early and make him breakfast, she should submit to his desire and do so.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of thinking comes from defining authority and submission in military terms.<sup>15</sup> The military operates with rigid and unyielding hierarchy and discipline. Officers give commands and expect to be obeyed.<sup>16</sup> If that’s the way that marriage is supposed to work, then it makes sense for wives to cater to their husbands’ preferences.

But families aren’t armies, and husbands and wives aren’t called to imitate military rank and order. Instead, they are to devote themselves to a relationship of love and service.<sup>17</sup> Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially by following Christ’s example of self-denial. Wives don’t owe their husbands obedience as if they were soldiers.

Authority and submission are one aspect of the husband-and-wife relationship—not the whole. A husband’s leadership isn’t about power and privilege or about figuring out who’s in charge or who should have the final say. A wife’s submission isn’t about catering to preferences.<sup>18</sup> Submission in marriage is “appropriate, logical, and Christian,” because it’s “based on a love relationship in which one party yields to another who

13. See Martha Peace, “Soap Bubbles Submission,” *Martha Peace* (blog), February 24, 2016, <http://marthapeacetew.blogspot.com/2016/02/soap-bubbles-submission.html>.

14. See Emily Jensen, “Wives, Honor Your Husband’s Preferences,” *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, November 13, 2015, <http://cbmw.org/topics/marriage-public-square/wives-honor-your-husbands-preferences/>.

15. See Doug Ponder, “The Heart of Femininity,” *Re | Source*, accessed August 23, 2017, <http://www.remnantresource.org/the-heart-of-femininity/>.

16. See Tracy, “What Does ‘Submit in Everything’ Really Mean?” 305.

17. See Tracy, 305.

18. See Tracy, 310–11.

uses his power to sacrifice on her behalf.”<sup>19</sup> The Bible’s emphasis is on how husbands and wives are to serve each other in Christ while working together as co-laborers.

As is the case in all human relationships, both authority and submission in marriage are limited and qualified. A wife submits to her own husband, not just to any man. A husband has no authority over his neighbor’s wife down the street. Believers owe ultimate obedience and submission to Christ. Wives aren’t supposed to submit to anything sinful, and husbands shouldn’t ask them to.

Will God-honoring authority and submission look the same in all marriages? Not necessarily. For example, what was appropriate for wives in the early church wouldn’t fit all women everywhere. The Bible gives us guidelines but not all the specifics for every marriage.<sup>20</sup> We will look at this more in chapter 12.

*Parents and children.* In Ephesians 5–6, Paul also addresses parents and children. Referencing the Ten Commandments, he tells children to obey their parents—both fathers and mothers. He urges parents to raise their children with gentleness. As parents, we are called to love and serve our children, which often means putting their needs before our own.

Parental authority is limited and never absolute. Our authority is limited to our own children; it’s not over any child anywhere. It’s also limited by the age of our children—we don’t have the same authority to discipline or direct our children when they’re adults as we do when they’re younger. Parental authority is also limited when it comes to what we can ask and expect our children to do. We should never ask them to sin or expect them to do things that are beyond their abilities, as the Westminster Larger Catechism reminds us.

Jesus’s response to Mary and Joseph when they found Him in the temple (see Luke 2:41–51) is a good example of honoring parents while respecting the limitations of their authority. When Mary and Joseph

19. Tracy, 307.

20. See Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 212.

found Him after looking for Him for three days, they were frustrated. Jesus responded by reminding them that God the Father had given Him work that He needed to do. He respected Mary and Joseph's authority and continued to live in submission to them, but He also adjusted their expectations of Him.<sup>21</sup>

### **Authority and Submission in the Body of Christ**

Authority and submission are also an important aspect of the relationship between church leaders and congregations. Being a pastor, elder, or deacon is a respectable position and a high calling, but it comes with a greater weight of responsibility. The church's leadership has an essential role to fulfill.

God gives ordained church leaders the responsibility of the ministry of the Word and sacrament.<sup>22</sup> He also makes them responsible for the care and protection of the members of their congregations. Scripture uses the illustration of shepherds who watch over their sheep (see 1 Peter 5:1–4). Sometimes shepherds gather and feed the sheep with gentleness and love. Other times shepherds drive off wolves who threaten the safety and lives of the flock.

Church members are called to submit to the authority of their ordained leaders. As Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

As in other types of relationships, church authority is limited and qualified. Not everyone who wants to go into ministry has been called by God to do so. And not everyone meets the qualifications. The Bible sets a high bar:

If any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the

21. See Tracy, "What Does 'Submit in Everything' Really Mean?" 307.

22. See Aimee Byrd, *No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), 92.

overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1:6–9)

Paul writes that ordained leadership in the church is restricted to qualified men. Being a man isn’t the *only* qualification, but it *is* a requirement. In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul explains that women aren’t to “teach or exercise authority” over men.<sup>23</sup>

But don’t hear what Paul isn’t saying. He isn’t saying that women can never have authority over men or that men can never learn from women. He simply means that women aren’t called to positions of authority in the church that would involve their teaching men authoritatively in the church’s public worship.<sup>24</sup> Outside the ordained leadership of the church, women aren’t restricted from having authority.

If ordained leadership is male, does that mean that half the church (the women) submits to the other half (the men)? No—church members are male and female, and we’re all expected to submit to church leadership. Even ordained leaders are supposed to submit to others in the church. Many churches have some type of ecclesiastical structure that means that no leader has absolute authority. There are layers of authority and submission. In some churches, congregations elect their leaders. In others, the denomination appoints the individual church’s leadership. Despite the differences in how leaders are selected, churches often have some system of checks and balances to guard against abuses of power and to protect against erroneous teaching.

Church authority is also limited in scope. Church leaders have authority over only the members of their own congregations. A pastor in Idaho doesn’t have authority over a random church member in Texas.

23. I’ll discuss this topic further in chapter 15.

24. See Carl Trueman, “1 Timothy 2:11–15” (sermon, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Ambler, PA, November 11, 2011), available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160324093349/http://cornerstoneopc.com/media/2011-11-20.mp3>.

And, as enjoyable as listening to online sermons can be, you aren't supposed to submit to the authority of any and every pastor whom you hear on a podcast.

Even within the context of our own churches, church leaders have limited authority. They don't have the authority to tell you how to dress, how to vote, how to eat, where to live, or how to educate your kids. The Westminster Confession reminds us that "God alone is Lord of the conscience."<sup>25</sup> We have liberty as Christians to make decisions about these kinds of things. As with the other examples of submission we have discussed, we are never supposed to obey sinful commands, and our church leaders should never ask us to.

### **Authority and Submission in Society**

Included with the discussion of household relationships in Ephesians 6 is the master/slave relationship. While we don't have masters and slaves today, we do have employers and employees. We also have our civil government and our relationship to it as citizens.

*Employers and employees.* While Paul doesn't specifically address the modern employee/employer relationship, his instructions to masters and slaves do show us how we should work with and for others. Slaves are to serve their masters with honesty. Masters are to treat those who work for them with "justice and fairness" (Col. 4:1) and not threaten them (see Eph. 6:9). Whether we are the employer or the employee, ultimately our work is in service to Christ (see Col. 3:23–24).

Slaves and masters aren't a perfect analogy for us, of course. Employees have much greater rights and freedoms than slaves ever had, and employers have more restrictions on their authority. But we have an enduring responsibility to work honestly and respectfully. Believers in the workforce must serve Christ and do so honorably, whether as employers or as employees.

An employer's authority is limited to his or her own employees. A boss at one company doesn't have authority over an employee at a

25. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 20.2.

different company across town. Most companies have layers of authority. You may be both responsible to others and responsible for others. Even the heads of companies are often responsible to stockholders or members of a board.

Can employers tell their employees to do whatever they want? No—an employer’s authority is limited to work-related things. Your boss doesn’t have the authority to tell you where to go to church or who to marry. And, as we have seen with the other relationships, employers shouldn’t ask their employees to sin, and employees shouldn’t submit if doing so would cause them to sin.

*Civil leaders and citizens.* We’re all familiar with the authority of civil leadership. As citizens, we have the responsibility to vote for our leaders (if we live in a country where we can vote), to pay our taxes, and to obey our country’s laws. As Paul reminds us, government leadership is meant for our good (see Rom. 13:1–3). Government leaders are responsible to God, who gave them their authority. Christians in government should seek to serve others, thereby following Christ’s example of servant leadership.

Civil authority is limited, though. If you’ve ever traveled internationally, you’re familiar with the limits of national governments. When you’re traveling in Paraguay, German laws don’t have authority over you. You’re responsible for obeying the laws of the Paraguayan government.

Are you supposed to do anything that a government says no matter what? No—civil authority is limited in scope as well as by location. Your government doesn’t have the authority to tell you where to worship or how to decorate your house, for example. We are called to submit to civil authorities unless doing so would mean sinning against God. In such cases, as Peter and the apostles said, “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

As we have seen, authority and submission are a function of our relationships. The nature of each relationship determines who should lead and who should submit.

Regardless of which role we have in a relationship, our example is Christ. It doesn't matter whether we're in authority or in submission. Jesus showed us the way to do both well. Whatever we do, whether we lead or submit, we should do all things so that we give glory and honor to God.

God-honoring authority is a blessing, and faithful submission is beautiful. But there is so much more to life than authority and submission. In the next chapter, we will look at how the biblical themes of unity, interdependence, and service help us to look beyond authority and submission in our discussions about women and men so that we can be co-laborers together in all aspects of our lives.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of examples of God-honoring authority in your life?
2. What do you think about submission being a *human* characteristic?
3. What relationships do you have in which you are in authority?  
In submission?
4. How is Jesus our example for both God-honoring authority and submission?
5. What are examples of the limitations on authority and submission?