

## STUDY 18

# True Submission in the Church

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### INTRODUCTION

Submission in the Church is a subject rarely discussed. Submission to another is perceived to be degrading. Indeed, many who have sought the submission of others to their rule in the Church have been abusive and cruel. However, our reaction to a seeming subservience may stem from a natural disposition that resists anything that demands anything disagreeable or contrary to our own autonomy.

As we shall see, submission in the Church involves many interleaved matters, like authority in the Church, alongside the questions of who should exercise authority, how should leaders rule with integrity, and how far should our obedience go? Does the holy Church have the power to exercise discipline in a manner that does not turn its members into muted wimps?

God's Gospel of mercy and grace in Christ Jesus sets us free from tyrants. Our master tyrant is ourselves. We are liberated by a master stronger than our own destructive rule. He saves us by the power of his lordship over our insidious autonomy to freely and gladly submit to the saving power of the Lord Jesus:

But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted . . . (Rom. 6:17).<sup>1</sup>

### MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Because you fear Christ subordinate yourselves to one another . . . (Eph. 5:21).<sup>2</sup>

This imperative is attached to the five preceding imperatives in verses 15–20. The impetus for mutual submission is the *fear of Christ*. Implicit in this fear is the expectation of Christ's future appearing as our Judge. We are accountable to him who saves us by his grace. Ours is not an imposed submission, or the subversion of our wills as in the case of a totalitarian deliverer. Submission can be offered with enthusiasm by those who have come to faith, hope in Christ and live in the community of love (Eph. 4:1–6).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Translation, Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, Garden City, 1974, p. 607.

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In Romans 12:3–8, describing the diversity of gifts given to the body of Christ, Paul says we are not to get above everyone else in self-importance. We are to think realistically about ourselves in relation to other people in the congregation. This is because we are individually members one of another.

True mutual submission in the Church, then, means regarding the value of the other and not undermining the service they bring in the holy worship of God. Each member will give to the other the honour they are due, they will be cooperative and when necessary will put themselves out for the sake of others. (Mutual submission does not mean the life of the congregation is like an every person amateur hour with applause for the favourite performer.) Because each member belongs to the other in the fellowship of Christ, we will take responsibility for giving the service needed and will carry the burden for our kith and kin (Gal. 6:1–3; 1 Cor. 16:15f.).

Therefore, it is essential that members connect with each other and take time to nourish those connections. It is in this way that rapport and emotional resonance grow. To submit to each other will mean openness and an information flow that is not distorted. In such an environment meetings will not have to operate on a prosecutor/defendant model.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued for the indispensable truth that Christian community is in and through Jesus Christ:

What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.<sup>3</sup>

Only in Christ who justifies sinners can mutual submission commence and continue fruitfully without being shocked by the failures and sins of each other. Mutual submission lays the foundation for an ordered community which is being equipped for Christ's mission and for battle with the powers (Eph. 6:10ff.) Such a community is not passive and cannot submit to 'moral and spiritual malaria' because its life and Gospel will be controversial in its battle for truth and light.<sup>4</sup>

### **KNOW YOUR LEADERS**

... we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect ['know them', AV], those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

To know those who labour among you in the Church seems to cover everything that relates to leadership and governance in congregations. The labourers were possibly the elders of the congregation. To 'know them' is a rather intimate term for leaders and seems to indicate that they were one with the congregation and not officials once removed in a position of antiseptic safety. They are to be known for the role that they have, for the work they do and the authority they exercise for and over the Church. Hence their labour entitles them to respect.

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<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM, London, 1972, pp. 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction: Four Lectures on the Religious Situation*, General Books, La Vergne, 2010, p. 4.

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Pastor–leaders have charge over the life, worship and mission of a congregation. They have the authority to admonish the members regarding their life and doctrine. That is, pastor/elders are in place to speak to the wayward about their conduct and to remind people of what is remiss or lapsed in their behaviour and faith. It implies church discipline (Acts 20:28; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; Titus 1:5–9).

Hebrews 13:17 reinforces what has been said so far, but adds that the leaders of the congregation are accountable for themselves as well as for those who are committed to their care: ‘Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.’

It is hoped that on the day of reckoning the leaders will want to give a cheerful account of the cooperation of the people in their charge (Ezek. 3:18). The original leaders brought the Word of grace to them (Heb. 13:7) as they came in the name of the author of their faith (Heb. 12:2). The congregation received the faith initially brought by their leaders. (Their leaders preached the Gospel but did not *mediate* the grace of God to them.) The message of God’s grace is one with Jesus Christ in his past ministry to them. He is the same today, and not just a man of yesterday (Heb. 13:8). For pastors, the Gospel we preach has a past, but is not shut up in the past. The Gospel is not settled in our time but relates to future times and to God’s ultimate future.

Possibly we are more interested in church leadership, authority and discipline as it is subjected to the current secular trends. Undermining leaders is often the norm as is fault-finding of those who are over us. Congregations seem to have a reactionary hostility to any ecclesiastical leaders who are bound to hold up a mirror to their life and mission. Pastors themselves duck and weave to avoid having to abide by rulings of their Church Council, Diaconate, Bishop, Presbytery, Synod or Assembly. Many rationalisations can be put up by a pastor to support their stance which may sometimes be reinforced by threatening legal action if their behaviour is challenged.

### **CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Already we have seen that those elected to leadership within the Church are given authority to rule, to exercise oversight and to call on the congregation to live lives that are consistent with the Gospel of Christ. The gracious God is the commanding God. What concerns Christ concerns his body also; his work of reconciliation on the cross. It encompasses his defeat of our corruption and death in his triumphant resurrection and his Kingly work bringing about a new heaven and a new earth. In all these parts of the salvation of the world, Christ is intimately one with his body the Church. Congregations, then, are charged by Christ to order their lives in such a way that they beat out the harmonious music of grace and truth. Pastors, leaders or elders are authorised to maintain the unity of Christ within the congregation, in its life of worship and mission. We must refuse to separate the truth of the Gospel from the government of the Church. Calvin wrote that when the governance of the Church is found to be in essential unity with the Gospel it is to be honoured and accepted:

Let them show us a hierarchy in which bishops are distinguished, but not by refusing to be subject to Christ, in which they depend upon Him as the only Head, and act solely with reference to Him,

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in which they cultivate brotherly fellowship with one another, bound together by no other tie than His truth, then, indeed, I will confess that there is no anathema too strong for those who do not regard them with reverence, and yield them the fullest obedience.<sup>5</sup>

Whether it is Episcopal bishops, or leaders of the local congregation, the unity of Christ and his body and the unity of leadership with the Gospel requires a discipline to uphold it, to keep it to its calling and to protect it from error and human arrogance.

The authority of the keys which open the Gospel of forgiveness to people or close it to the impenitent is very significant and demanding for the Church. After Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus said:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:18–19).

And on resurrection day Jesus sent his disciples, and empowered them for their mission with the Holy Spirit, saying to them:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:23).

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 interprets these powers as:

... Being exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments, according to their calling either to many or to individuals.<sup>6</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism on Lord's Day 31, question 83:

Q. What are the keys of the kingdom?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and the Christian discipline towards repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.<sup>7</sup>

Paul can address the Corinthian congregation severely about the way in which they relativised and minimised destructive evil within their community. He speaks of them being arrogant instead of mourning over their behaviour. Paul's word of discipline comes from the grace of God. We could say that the whole power of the keys comes from the Gospel. The ministry of the keys should never be separated from the Gospel (1 Cor. 5:1ff.; 2 Cor. 2:5ff.; 12:21). John Calvin, while acknowledging the right of binding and loosing that Christ has conferred upon his Church, emphasises that this right is bound up with the word of the Gospel:

For when the whole Church stands as it were at the bar of God, confesses her guilt, and finds her only refuge in the divine mercy, it is no common or light solace to have an ambassador of Christ present, invested with the mandate for reconciliation, by whom she may hear her absolution

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<sup>5</sup> Quotation in T. F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 1, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 1959, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Augsburg Confession AD 1530, Article XXVIII; Of Ecclesiastical Power (*Concord of the Lutheran Church*, Concordia Publ., Adelaide, 1952, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism 1563, CRC Publ., Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 47.

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pronounced . . . But when we treat of the keys, we must always beware of dreaming of any power apart from the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Error and diverting from the truth is a prime cause of churches dividing and imploding. Pastors together with the leaders of a congregation have many tasks to fulfil, but one that we are strongly inclined to avoid is making the hard decisions. These often include the practice of Gospel discipline. We often want to pass the buck to another person or body, but to the detriment of the health of God's people and the message of grace we have to tell the world (Rom. 2:24). Discipline must be exercised with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:25).

If the power of the keys is separated from the grace of the Gospel then we run the very serious danger of using power to shut doors that are not closed by God. In this manner discipline becomes legalistic and destructive, making us very lenient toward our own faults and severe to those of others. It is totally wrong in this matter to insist on the primacy of the Law with ruthless severity. Only God knows the thoughts of the heart. We cannot presume to use this role to act recklessly, crushing the consciences of the weak and lonely (2 Tim. 2:24ff.). The grace of the Gospel of the One who ate with sinners and welcomed them must first, and continue to, instruct leaders and congregations in this matter (2 Tim. 3:16f.).

### **THE SUBMISSION OF LOVE**

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1–3).

Those who have the ministry of overseeing God's people receive their authority from the Christ who suffered for them, 'the righteous for the unrighteous' (1 Pet. 3:18). They tend the flock for no self-gain, or status. They know the Son of God who loves the Father and submits to his will in love. Total love is total obedience (1 John 5:2). Apart from love, all talk about submission will be formal, fed by the politics of guilt and pity, and will be arrogant, controlling and deaf to the cries of people. But in love the shepherds are one with their people, they don't exercise discipline in safe isolation. The people learn love from their leaders whom they now love. This is a mutual submission and a willing service to all. Elders who live in submission to Christ's authority will have the power to effect that authority in their ministry of the Gospel (Luke 7:1–10).

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, tr. Henry Beveridge, book 3, ch. 4, pt 14, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970, p. 546.