

IX 9Marks



Authority

How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable,
Strengthens Communities,
and Promotes Human Flourishing



Jonathan Leeman

“Aversion to authority seems to increase with each succeeding generation in America, and the Christian community is not immune. Today’s young adults raised within the church seem even more allergic to hierarchy than those I taught ten years ago in Christian school, and the erosion of trust seems the undeniable motivator. If Satan used falsehoods to play upon the trust of God’s children in the garden, it only makes sense that rehearsing what is true about God’s good intentions will lead to a restoration of our trust in authority. Jonathan Leeman takes readers by the hand and walks patiently through God’s plan for authority and submission outlined in the Scriptures. He deftly clarifies when the role of authority calls for action or restraint, addressing many of the subtle lies that have eroded trust in the institutions of our day.”

Roy Griffith, Headmaster, Rockbridge Academy, Crownsville, Maryland

“In a world where authority is constantly being questioned, Jonathan Leeman reminds us to steward our authority for God’s glory. He helpfully examines both good and bad practices and guides us toward better examples of God-given authority.”

Gordon Reid, President, Stop and Shop LLC

“Thirty-two years of military leadership and six in industry, and still learning! This is a compelling, convicting, and compassionate discourse. Jonathan Leeman uses powerful anecdotes and stories to drive home the principles, truths, and precepts of authority and frames the context for practical application. A must-read for all in and under ‘author-ity!’”

Scott Vander Hamm, Major General, United States Air Force (retired)

“Authority is under attack today because it is deemed to be oppressive. This book is a refreshingly thoughtful study of this theme. It firmly rejects abuse while showing authority to be vital to the proper functioning of society, church, and family. When properly used, authority serves those who are led. This timely book is a sure guide to this contentious subject: biblically faithful, pastorally wise, comprehensive in scope, and full of practical examples.”

Sharon James, Social Policy Analyst, The Christian Institute

“With the heart of a pastor and mind of a theologian, Jonathan Leeman offers a timely perspective on a timeless challenge. Using clear prose and compelling examples, he urges all faithful Christians to consider anew the biblical warrant for authority in every domain of our lives.”

William Inboden, Professor and Director, Alexander Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education, University of Florida

Authority

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Authority

*How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens
Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing*

Jonathan Leeman

Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing

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*To my parents (David and Barbara Leeman),
grandparents (Eric and Helga Newbold, Roy and Amanda
Leeman), pastors (Mark Dever, Thomas Schreiner, John
Joseph), professors (Steve Wellum, Bruce Ware, Shawn Wright,
Greg Wills), bosses (Chip Collins, Matt Schmucker, Ryan
Townsend), and too many fellow elders to name, each of
whom let me experience the creative power of good authority
in my life, and apart from whom this book would not exist*

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Series Preface

THE 9MARKS SERIES OF BOOKS IS PREMISED on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It is our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare Christ's bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

Prelude

A Prayer of Confession

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT AUTHORITY, both the good and the bad kind. Yet I don't want to write an abstract book about an abstract topic. I want to personally engage you and how you use your authority, which requires being personally engaged myself.

To that end, I have written in a more conversational style. More important, I begin with a confession: for me to write about the good kind of authority is to write better than I am.

The good kind of authority is beautiful, like a perfectly symmetrical face is beautiful, or a life in perfect conformity to God's law is beautiful. But spend time staring into that face or into that law and you'll discover, by comparison, your face isn't perfect. And you don't keep all the law.

But I want to help you and me both to gaze into the face of the one who perfectly kept the law and who perfectly exercised his authority, so that you and I might be changed. And the only honest way to do that is with gospel transparency. I'm not a paragon of the good. Nor are you. To think otherwise is to be like the Pharisee who prayed, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like that tax collector over there."

Our profoundly Pharisaical post-Christian world, which has abandoned all ideas of original sin, teaches us to think that way. It classifies everyone as an abuser or a non-abuser, oppressor or non-oppressor. Those are the only moral categories it has left. If therefore you don't count yourself as an

abuser or oppressor, you get to point the finger at the bad people and thank God you're not like them.

The Bible does not let us off the hook so easily. It indicts all of us for misusing our authority. It teaches that Adam's bite of the fruit and Pharaoh's spilling of blood are differences of quantity, not quality. Pharaoh simply swung a much bigger hammer.

To be clear, some sins are far worse than others: murder is much worse than hatred and adultery than lust. Yet Jesus also asks us to meditate on how all these sins are constructed of the same stuff (Matt. 5:22, 28). Here is an unassailable fact: To some degree, you and I have misused our authority by lording it over others. We've used our leadership to serve ourselves rather than others. We have used our God-given stewardships at the expense of others and for our own gain. For us to begin anywhere other than acknowledging and confessing these things would be misguided.

Further, it will cause us to miss the opportunity to stare into the face of the Only One Man who is truly beautiful. It would also cause us to miss the path toward becoming like this One Perfect Man.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

The path to leading like he leads requires more than a moral lesson, as in, "Do these five things." It requires recognition and confession at the deepest levels of who we are, not just "Lord God, I have once or twice misused my authority. Oops. Sorry for the slipup," but, "Lord God, I am, by fallen nature, a misuser of authority, and I will misuse it repeatedly apart from your grace."

It requires repentance and faith.

For my part, then, I began this project by asking those "above" me (like bosses), "beside" me (like friends), and "beneath" me (like children or employees) whether I use authority well, asking each to especially highlight the negatives. Gratefully, people have said nice things. Yet to share my short-

comings, one person observed, “Every once in a while, you can be really intense. At worst, this can feel a little controlling.” Another remarked, “You can be very straightforward, which I enjoy. But I can imagine someone who doesn’t know you finding the occasional remark abrasive.”

Did you notice the subtext? Ordinarily, I know how to “behave.” I know how I should appear in my leadership on the outside. But “every once in a while” or “occasionally” something else slips out, and those little slips reveal the fallen version of me—or the “natural me” apart from God’s grace. They reveal something in the deeper waters of my soul.

What would that be? Perhaps a deeper and more chronic overestimation of myself and my ability to control things. And deeper than that, an ongoing tendency to believe the serpent when he said to Eve, “You can be like God.” And deeper still than that, a profoundly diminished view of who God is. And together with all that, too little love for the ones I lead, sensitivity to them, and desire for their growth and strength.

Yet what about you? You have authority. Everyone does, even if you’re a thirteen-year-old and have rule only over your bedroom or the thoughts inside your head. You have dominion over something—some plot of dirt like Adam and Eve in the garden. Do you view that plot of dirt as a stewardship given by God? Are you using your authority to create life, prosperity, and vitality for others? Or do you look at your domain and say, “It’s mine!” and use it for your own purposes and glory? And if we could see into the deeper waters of your soul, what would we find there? Would we find the impulse to say together with John the Baptist about Jesus, “May he increase and I decrease,” or just the opposite?

Those are some of the things I encourage you to think about as you read this book. Don’t read the stories about people who have used authority well and quickly tell yourself that you’re like them. Rather, thank God for their example, but ask yourself how you have not been like them but have been more like the people in the darker stories. Part of what’s wrong on this planet is that each one of us assumes, “I’m the good guy in that story,” when the Bible tells us over and over, “No, there is only One Good Guy.” His name wasn’t Adam or Abraham, Moses or David, Miriam or Mary, Peter or Paul. It is Jesus.

If you think you can simply adopt the five moral lessons that I offer midway through the book on how to exercise authority well, you might as

well stop now. You will remain proud. And if you remain proud, you will eventually use your authority in a way that hurts or belittles or undermines those whom you lead, even if God simultaneously uses your selfishness for good through his common grace. Insofar as you and I remain anxious or insecure or selfish or boastful or controlling or proud, no tools can finally help us. There is no “how to.” We will use our authority wrongly, even if we dress it up with lipstick and nice manners. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad. Good authority grows out of good natures, but if you’re a bad apple, you’re going to taste rotten. We need new natures, so that we can lead out of those new natures.

To gain new natures, we must begin by getting low, confessing our sins, and putting our hope in Christ. Perhaps the best way to begin this book, then, is with a prayer of confession. The goal of such confession isn’t just to feel bad about ourselves. It’s to name things accurately, so that we can then build a better life on a foundation that’s truly good and lasting, namely, on Christ:

Father God,

You have given us authority to give shape to the world around us. You have asked us to image you in how we use that authority, and to demonstrate for the world your own righteousness, love, generosity, and goodness.

Yet we have used our authority for our own gain, our own fame, our own power. We have failed to serve and love those under our care. We have taken advantage of them and their strength for our own purposes.

We’ve been like all those kings of Israel, who thought they could rule without being accountable to you; and the priests, who forgot your word.

We’ve been like Pharaoh, who used and even destroyed others for his own gain, instead of using his authority to give and encourage life.

We’ve been like David, when he refused to discipline his sons, taking the shortsighted and easy path, to the hurt of his family and kingdom.

We’ve been like the foolish child in Proverbs, despising the counsel and wisdom of others as they try to help us lead.

We’ve been like Abraham, when he put his wife in harm’s way instead of undertaking the risk and burden himself.

We’ve been like Adam and Eve in the garden, who thought they were equal with you.

We've not been like Christ, who proved himself king by laying down his life for the sake of love. We have not loved.

Forgive us, Lord, both for what we've done and what we've left undone with the authority you have given us. Thank you for your promise that, if we confess our sins, you are faithful and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We don't stand before you saying, "Look at what a good job we've done," or "We weren't that bad," or "Consider these excuses." We plead not the smallness of our sin but its considerable size. And we plead the Son's perfect and beautiful righteousness, asking that you would mercifully regard us as you regard him.

Thank you for Jesus, who ruled as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David did not. What a glorious King and Savior, who came not to be served but to serve, and on whose shoulders the government of the world rightly rests. This Prince of Peace is worthy of all our praise and worship. Use this book to teach us to rule like him, for the good of others and the praise of your name.

Amen.

Introduction

Our Angst about Authority

ON A MONDAY IN NOVEMBER 2021, the parents of students at Reynolds Middle School in Fairview, Oregon, just outside Portland, received a three-sentence email from the school district. It told them the school would be shutting down in-person learning for three weeks. The faculty had been unable to stop the streak of fighting. They needed a chance to regroup.

Before the shutdown, students had staged a walkout due to their frustration with the administration's lack of control. "We just decided it was time to do something about it," observed one eighth-grader (age 13) about the grown-ups' failure to address the widespread fist-fighting, name-calling, and inappropriate touching.

"Kids are trying to take action that adults should be taking," said one parent.

"It was very unclear who was in charge," said another.

As the clamor from students and parents over the unsafe environment grew, the school finally decided to take the three-week hiatus in order to develop "safety protocols" and "social-emotional supports" for handling the chaos.¹

¹ "Students, Parents Call for District to Rein in Sexual Harassment, Fighting at Northeast Portland Middle School," *The Oregonian* (November 5, 2021): <https://www.oregonlive.com/education/2021/11/students-parents-call-for-district-to-rein-in-sexual-harassment-fighting-at-northeast-portland-middle-school.html>; "Reynolds Middle School Is Shutting Down In-Person Learning for 3 Weeks to Address Student Fights, Misbehavior"; *The Oregonian* (November 18, 2021): <https://www.oregonlive.com/news/2021/11/reynolds-middle-school-is-shutting-down-in>

I was staying with friends in Portland several weeks after this happened. Talking about it, we assumed the teachers and administrators cared about education. We assumed the parents did too. Yet for various reasons, the adults lacked the ability to take charge in a building full of eleven-to-thirteen-year-olds. Until the whole thing collapsed. The system shut down.

What was missing? Along with anything else we might say, the school lacked a right understanding of authority. Folks in Portland are angsty about authority. As are most Americans. As are citizens of Western democracies generally.

In the Democratic West

Human beings generally have a problem with authority, not just those of us who live in a Western-style liberal democracy. Yet to speak to my primary audience for just a second, our Western problem is that we don't know what to do with it. We hate it, but we cannot live without it.

So, leave Portland and join me in a trendy coffee shop in the neighborhood of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, a few blocks from where I work. It's Saturday morning. You're watching a well-heeled DC power couple at another table in their overpriced athletic attire, probably in their late thirties, trying desperately to placate their three-year-old. He's dropped a muffin and is now throwing a fit. The husband pleads softly. The wife desperately offers toys and more treats. They reason with him as if he were an adult. It's as if no one has ever explained that *they're* the parents. That they can draw lines and impose consequences. That they don't need the child's consent, if it comes to it. But now the kid is running around the coffee shop, and they look more desperate than ever. They're neutered. This family might live several economic strata above the world of Reynolds Middle School, but it's the same story. They lack the tools to lead their child and do him good. They don't know how to exercise authority.

To give them the benefit of the doubt, they come by their ignorance honestly. Western culture has betrayed and blinded them. Like the parents and teachers at Reynolds, they are the beneficiaries of several centuries worth of attacks against every authority conceivable. Every human has

-person-learning-for-3-weeks-to-address-student-fights-misbehavior.html. Both accessed April 9, 2022.

resisted authority since the garden of Eden, but we in the Enlightenment West have given that resistance moral and philosophical respectability. My public school teachers taught me not to trust the church's authority because the church persecuted Galileo; or the Bible's authority because science teaches us to leave superstition behind; or science's authority because one generation of scientists will disprove the former; or the king's authority because there's no such thing as the divine right of kings; or the democratic majority's authority because majorities can be tyrannical, too; or the authority of the courts because they're also playing politics; or the authority of the philosophers because they're playing language games; or language's authority because some French philosophers observed that people weaponize everyday terms like "straight" and "queer" to normalize our preferences and marginalize people who are different; or the market's authority because capitalism is the conjoined twin of racism; or police authority because they're racists too; or the media's authority because it is biased; or the authority of our XX or XY chromosomes because they don't tell us how we must define our gender; and, of course, Mom and Dad's authority because, well, life is more fun if you can sneak out and party. Haven't you seen *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*?

When all is said and done, there aren't any authorities left to topple. Except the authority of "Me." This is what the writers mean when they describe our day as "individualistic." Individualism doesn't mean I like to be alone or I don't have friends. It means, nobody can tell me what to do or who to be. No one has authority over me.

In Western Churches

Over the last few decades this angst about authority has grown inside churches, too. Christians have been impacted by the politics of the Donald Trump era, movements for opposing sexual assault (e.g., #MeToo and #ChurchToo), episodes of police brutality caught on smart phones, COVID quarantines and shutdowns, not to mention social media's ability to draw geographically far-flung people with shared discontents together into factions. Increasingly, Christians seem more suspicious of authority than ever.

The pile of church abuse cases and the fall of prominent pastors have undermined confidence in *pastoral and church authority*. We cannot trust the elders or even the whole congregation to keep pastors accountable.

Instead, we need academics to tell us what to think and “independent investigations” to solve our church problems.

This same pile of cases, together with the ever-present problem of abusive husbands, have undermined confidence in *male authority*. The label “complementarian,” which affirms the two-millennia-old Christian teaching of male headship in the church and home, may have experienced a surge of popularity in evangelical churches in the 1990s and early 2000s. But the tables have turned, aided in part by the leveling power of social media.

Meanwhile, government overreach during COVID provoked Christians on the political right to grow more and more suspicious of *government authority*. Of course, COVID restrictions only added to the suspicion that’s been growing steadily on the political right over the last two decades in response to sexual orientation and gender identity laws. A typical example: the governor of Oregon signed the Menstrual Dignity Act, requiring Oregon high schools to place tampon dispensers in *men’s* bathrooms! As a result, the rhetoric of an anti-elitist populism increasingly characterizes the political right. Christians on the political left, similarly, increasingly question *police authority*, due in part to the smart phone’s ability to film violent police encounters.

Who Are Our Heroes?

Perhaps the easiest place to spot our cultural angst over authority is to go to the movies and notice who the heroes are. As often as not, our movie heroes are the individuals who stand up to authority, because the authority figures are evil.

Luke Skywalker fights against the Empire in the *Star Wars* trilogy, Neo against the machines in the *Matrix* trilogy, Jason Bourne against the US Central Intelligence Agency in the *Bourne* trilogy, Katniss Everdeen against the capitol and President Snow in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Tris and Four against the Erudites in the *Divergent* trilogy, and on and on we could go.

General Maximus stands up to a corrupt Caesar in *Gladiator*, William Wallace opposes a corrupt King Edward in *Braveheart*, and literature teacher John Keating teaches his class to “seize the day” by casting off anything that hinders their freedom in *Dead Poet’s Society*.

And I’m just naming blockbusters. We also love the anti-hero who does things his own way and doesn’t quite fit society’s conventions: Indiana

Jones, Batman, Dirty Harry, and most cowboy Western movies you've ever seen.

Of course, the anti-authority catechizing begins in childhood with the Disney princess movies. As a man with four daughters, I've seen them all. The Little Mermaid sings, "Be'tcha on land they understand / they don't reprimand their daughters."²

So with Queen Elsa, somewhere in Scandinavia, belting proudly, "No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free."³

And Moana, on the opposite side of the planet in the South Pacific, harbors the same ambitions as her Scandinavian and underwater counterparts: "What's beyond that line? / . . . One day I'll know / How far I'll go."⁴

The repetition from movie to movie is striking, not to mention predictable and boring. It's as if our moral imaginations cannot conceive of a different kind of hero, so saturated is the Western soul with anti-authority-ism. The hero we cheer on is the person who resists the leadership, the system, the powers-that-be.

When you open your Bible, by contrast, a very different kind of hero emerges. These heroes often resist tyrannical rulers—Moses against Pharaoh, Elijah against Ahab, Esther against Haman, and of course Jesus against the religious leaders. Yet another, more central theme is always present in the Bible's picture of a hero. From start to finish, no matter what story is being told, the biblical hero is the person who is obedient to God.

Noah is obedient, making him a hero. Just ask the kids in Sunday school. So is Abraham, when he follows the Lord even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his son. So are Moses and Joshua and Ruth and David and the prophets, at least when they are obeying. And all this leads to Jesus, the perfectly obedient Son, who speaks only what the heavenly Father tells him to speak and does only what the heavenly Father tells him to do. Jesus is the blessed man of Psalm 1 who doesn't walk in the way of the wicked but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, meditating on it night and day.

2 Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, "Part of Your World" (from *The Little Mermaid*), © 1989, Walt Disney Music Company.

3 Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, "Let It Go" (from *Frozen*), © 2013, Walt Disney Music Company.

4 Lin-Manuel Miranda, "How Far I'll Go" (from *Moana*), © 2016, Walt Disney Music Company.

Meanwhile, the bad guys in the Bible are always the ones who disobey, from Cain to Pharaoh to King Saul to Queen Jezebel to Herod and Pontius Pilate.

Every once in a blue moon a blockbuster movie will encourage you to root for someone to obey—basically the exception that proves the rule. Viewers want young Anakin Skywalker to submit to his Jedi master Obi-Won Kenobi and not turn into Darth Vader, for instance. We also want Harry Potter to stop lying and tell the truth to Dumbledore. So the instinct to obey is not entirely absent in our culture, but it's pretty unusual.

Interestingly, cheering for someone to obey or submit is more common in Christian movies. In the Christian movies, the plot always centers around the hero coming to the end of himself, submitting to God, and finding redemption, whether the movie is *Ben Hur*, *The Mission*, *Fireproof*, *Facing the Giants*, or *I Can Only Imagine*.

Yet notice, even in these Christian movies, the storylines picture the person wrestling only with himself and God. It's not about submitting to other people. Submitting to God is one thing, but submitting to people? That makes us nervous.

Conflicted and Angsty

So here we are, in this moment in which we all feel both conflicted and angsty about the idea of authority. After all, we've seen authority's abuses, from George III overtaxing the American colonists to parents abusing their children. There are good reasons why the Western modern and now post-modern tradition have cultivated in our hearts a "hermeneutic of suspicion" toward all authority. In one sense, we're right to adopt a default setting of suspicion toward those who have authority over us. Power corrupts, as they say. And abuse, which I'd define simply as misusing authority in a way that harms another person, is common.

Still, strangely perhaps, something instinctive in us keeps reaching out to *other* authority figures to solve the problem of bad authority. During the Civil Rights era, African Americans reached out to the federal government to address the discrimination they were experiencing at the hands of state and city governments. In our own era, the public voices advocating for abuse victims inside churches not only condemn the pastors who handled their cases poorly, they commend the path of reaching out to the police and child-protective services.

We instinctively recognize that the solution to bad authority is seldom no authority, but almost always good authority.

Yet book after book and tweet after tweet in our present moment only highlight the badness of bad authority. Very few attempts have been offered to define, illustrate, and commend good authority. In a world characterized by so many bad authorities, defining the bad strikes me as a necessary job, but the easier job. The harder job is to define and present good authority.

Around the World

On the flip side, it's worth mentioning how context-specific these introductory remarks have been so far. Spend time in other countries around the world, and you'll discover that this contempt of authority is not typical.

In my day job, I work with pastors and have had the privilege of spending time with pastors internationally. Whether I'm speaking to pastors in Colombia, Zambia, India, or other places, often they struggle with teaching their congregations the opposite problem: that the senior pastor should not possess all power and authority. My friends in Hispanic and African contexts, for instance, explain that people like the strong leader. Therefore, pastors struggle with raising up other leaders who will do anything more than rubber-stamp the senior pastor's own preferences. Meanwhile, pastors in southern or eastern Asian contexts, like their African counterparts, feel the challenges that arise within the context of an honor/shame culture. Leaders expect honor; people under them quickly give it.

Every location has its own challenges. A missionary friend in a formerly Soviet Central Asian country, knowing that I was working on this book, wrote me,

One of the biggest obstacles to seeing healthy churches in our context is the abuse of authority within the church. Our country was part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. The Soviet idea of authority continues to this day in the country's government, and that idea of authoritarian leadership has seeped into the church and is the prevailing way most pastors and church leaders view authority. There is a dire need for a biblical understanding of authority and how to use it properly in the post-Soviet, Central Asian context.

To make his point, my missionary friend offered two examples. First, a church member asked his pastor if there was church budget money for helping with evangelism and outreach. The pastor responded by saying that the church member had no authority to ask him about church funds. The money is given to the pastor, and he has sole authority over what happens with that money. Nor did he expect to be held accountable for his handling of the funds.

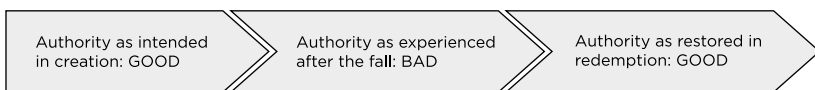
My friend's second example: in a conversation with other pastors, an older pastor referred to himself as "king" in his church and the members as his "subjects." He encouraged the younger pastors to anticipate the day when they, too, would be kings in their churches with subjects under their authority.

At best, the pastors in these two illustrations will have ineffective ministries, with few people growing in grace and wisdom. People will wander away until the churches shut down. That's what will happen if these two pastors lack charisma or competence. If it turns out they *are* charismatic and competent, their ministries could do great damage in people's lives and Christian discipleship.

This introduction has emphasized an American antipathy toward authority, since I assume that's my primary audience. Still, I have tried to reflect on Scripture and write the rest of this book with both problems in mind—the problem of an authoritarian overemphasis and the problem of an individualistic rejection of all authority.

One Eye on the Good, One on the Bad

A right view of authority must always keep both eyes open. One eye must always be fixed on bad authority. This is Satan's version. It's authority as exercised in the fall. And one eye must be fixed on good authority. This is God's version. It's authority as intended in creation and as exercised in redemption. With both eyes open, we see that authority is a good but dangerous gift.



Good, godly authority "authors" life, like the root of the word itself: *author-ity*. As we'll discover, it doesn't just work from the top down, but also from

the bottom up. Good authority says, “Let me be the platform on which you build your life. I’ll supply you, fund you, resource you, guide you. Just listen to me.”

Good authority binds in order to loose, corrects in order to teach, trims in order to grow, disciplines in order to train, legislates in order to build, judges in order to redeem, studies in order to innovate. It is the teacher teaching, the coach coaching, the mother mothering. It is the rules for a game, the lines on a road, a covenant for lovers.

It says, “Trust me, and I will give you a garden in which to create a world. Just keep my commandments. I love you.”

Good authority loves. Good authority gives. Good authority generally passes out power.

Yet our first parents, and we ourselves, chose not to use our authority according to God’s commandments. We stopped asking for God’s authorization but relied instead on the serpent’s, since he appealed to our desires for supremacy. He promised loosing without binding, growing without trimming, innovation without study.

What has resulted is a rebellious and cursed world. We use our authority selfishly and therefore ineffectually. And since ineffectually then violently, believing violence will achieve our ends. Cain is not worshiped for his “worship,” so he kills.

Sin, in other words, is nothing more or less than humanity’s misuse of authority. Adam’s bite and Pharaoh’s bloodshed belong to the same class, operate by the same principles, possess the same authorization. As I expressed it in the prelude, Pharaoh merely swung a much bigger hammer.

Bad authority discourages, cripples, wilts, sucks dry, dehumanizes, snuffs out, annihilates. It uses, but doesn’t give. It is political imperialism, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, business monopolization, social oppression, child abuse.

Of course, bad authority doesn’t always wear such monstrous faces. Often it charms and persuades. It borrows truth and offers empathy. It says, “I know how you’re feeling. I recognize your troubles. Here is the solution. Listen to me. Keep *my* commandments.”

Bad authority takes a good and glorious gift that God has given to humanity and employs it for evil. It is a liar and a charlatan. Yet it is so very real, at least for a time.

Ever since the fall, the world has offered a mix of good and bad. The good comes sometimes from God's special grace, sometimes from his common grace. Even apart from Christ's first coming, history offers comparatively good and bad kings. Think of Pharaoh at the time of Joseph versus Pharaoh at the time of Moses.

The first coming of Christ, the perfect king, represents the beginning of the end of the bad. Yet now, in between Jesus's first and second comings, good and bad uses of authority remain mixed together, even among God's people, even in a single person. One day I'm the father I want to be. The next day I'm not.

Wisdom today is knowing how to keep our eyes on both good and bad uses of authority. Just as the Bible tells us there's a time to tear down and a time to build up, a time for war and a time for peace (Eccl. 3:1–8), so there's a time for Luke Skywalker to rebel and for Anakin Skywalker to submit. We must talk about the goodness of authority as God intends, yet we must not have idealized expectations for how well people in this world will use it.

The Bible is acutely aware of both good and bad authority, and it intends for us to study both. Consider an Israelite king. The king is *over* his kingdom. Yet he's a good king only insofar as he puts himself *under* God's law and *with* his fellow Israelites. Look at God's instructions for him, and notice what I have italicized for emphasis:

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law. . . . And it shall be with him, and he shall *read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.* (Deut. 17:18–20)

The kings of Israel were supposed to make themselves accountable to God's law, and to acknowledge a basic equality between themselves and the people. "If you are *over others*," says God, "you had better be *under me*, because then you realize you're no better than anyone else, and that you're only a steward, a landlord, a guardian of what's mine!"

The take-away lesson here: Good human authority is never absolute. Good authority is always accountable. Good authority drives inside the lines that God has painted on the road. In fact, good authority is always submissive!

You shouldn't lead if you cannot submit or stay in your lane, because good leadership is always in submission to God and anyone else whom God places over us. Only God's authority is absolute and comprehensive, being accountable only to the law of his own nature. The authority of creatures is always relative, as we'll consider in the coming chapters.

Furthermore, good authority, as set down in Scripture and as I've witnessed it, is seldom an advantage to those who possess it. It involves leading and making decisions, to be sure. Jesus led. But what the godly leader feels day to day are not all the advantages, but the burdens of responsibility, of culpability, of even bearing another's guilt. Good authority is profoundly costly, usually involving the sacrifice of everything. It requires the end of personal desires. Meanwhile, those "under" good authority often possess most of the advantages. They're provided protection and opportunity, strength and freedom. For instance, I would much rather have *my* job than my boss Ryan's job. Ryan has to deal with the tough stuff. He has to absorb blame when things don't go well. He has to pick up the slack when others leave it. Meanwhile, he continually provides me with a track to run on, and I'm free not to worry about the tougher things.

Furthermore, isn't this precisely what we see in Jesus's use of authority, leading up to the cross? He took the hard stuff on himself so that we might have the freedom to grow and run.

When we stop believing authority can be good, we grow in cynicism. We grow incapable of trust. We insist the world operates on our terms, which is another way of describing "individualism." When this becomes widespread, community breaks down, because authoritative relationships teach us how to defer to other people, even in relationships where no hierarchy exists.

When we stop worrying about authority becoming bad, we grow in pride and self-deceit, because we assume we're right. We lack sympathy for the vulnerable, because we assume the decisions of the hierarchy are just. We condone sin in our leaders or sin performed on behalf of the group.

A Tale of Two Coaches

In short, the goal of this book is to understand both the good and the bad versions of authority.

What makes bad authority bad? My friend Anthony's high school baseball coach, Coach Linus (not his real name), was a bad authority.⁵ Anthony attended a boarding school for disadvantaged children in Pennsylvania. Like most of the boys in the school, he grew up poor and without a dad. Coach Linus knew how important coaches are to fatherless boys, and he used that knowledge to play favorites and leverage the boys against each other. He would insult them, mock them, and always remind them that he was above them. Anthony recalled one friend named Mike, who was one of the best hitters he had ever seen. Yet Coach Linus continually criticized Mike's weight and character, until Mike quit. "Playing for Coach Linus," Anthony said, "felt like a burden you could never be relieved of." Not surprisingly, Coach Linus got nothing out of his players and never won a game.

Meanwhile, what makes a good authority good? Anthony's high school *football* coach, Coach Guyer, was a good authority. Guyer, too, knew most of these boys were fatherless. Yet, knowing that, he worked to provide what they lacked with strong accountability and care. He made them work hard. He required them to sprint from every exercise to the next and drilled them constantly. Sometimes he did the running and drills with them, and he could convince them he was confident in them. He offered hard words of correction, but he said them in a way that no boy doubted the coach had his best interest at heart. "Looking back," Anthony reflected, "I realized Coach Guyer wasn't the best coach in a technical sense. He had a simple and basic playbook. The other teams could call out our plays before they happened. But the coach got everything out of us. Every guy on the team gave it his all. And we won games!" Guyer now belongs to the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. Anthony would eventually invite Coach Guyer to attend his wedding and remains in touch with him to this day.

What's the difference between these two coaches? Answering that is the goal of this book.

5 Unless specified otherwise, names in this book are real.

The Plan

Here's the plan for doing that. *Parts 1 and 2* ("What Is Authority?" [chs. 1–3]; "What Is Submission?" [chs. 4–5]) look at the biblical basics. We'll consider what authority and submission are, and I'll try to help you stare hard at the good and the bad—both in the Bible and in life. Bad authority steals and destroys life, while good authority creates life. Beyond that, God gave us authority to protect the vulnerable, strengthen communities, and promote human flourishing. If you're a critic of authority, you might try staring hard at the good. If you're an advocate of authority, and especially if you're in a position of authority, you need to stare hard at the bad.

Part 3 ("How Does Good Authority Work? Five Principles" [chs. 6–10]) will focus on five attributes of good authority. If the goal of parts 1 and 2 is to help us to embrace good authority and hate bad authority, the goal of part 3 is to offer five practical handles for practicing good authority. These principles aren't just theories for me. They capture how I've sought to live with my wife, children, employees, and congregation. I haven't kept them perfectly, but they are the principles I strive toward every day.

Part 4 ("What Does Good Authority Look Like in Action?" [chs. 11–17]) begins by distinguishing two kinds of authority: authority of counsel and authority of command. Those with an authority of counsel, like husbands and elders, do not have a biblically assigned enforcement mechanism. Those with an authority of command, like governments and parents of young children, do. We'll discover that this distinction significantly impacts how you will use your authority. From there we'll consider how authority should look in a number of different domains.

Following chapter 17, the Conclusion then offers a final reflection on the idea of equality as well as the beginning of all good authority, which is the fear of God.

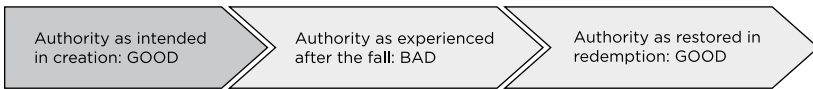
The goal of this book is to help every husband, parent, pastor, policeman, politician, officer, and employer understand this good and dangerous gift of authority, and then equip you to handle it with care. I hope to challenge those who use authority excessively, as well as those who abdicate and avoid the hard decisions. Not only that: I hope it helps

you reflect a little bit more on God and what he is like. The topic of authority takes us right to the heart of who God is, and how he means for us to image him. What you think about authority, finally, reveals quite a bit about what you think about God.

PART I

WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

Authority Is God’s Good Creation Gift for Sharing His Rule and Glory



“I LOVE TO TALK ABOUT MY DAD.”

That’s the first thing Angela said when I finally got ahold of her by phone. Several weeks earlier, I had told my church I was writing a book on authority and asked them for stories about their experiences with authority—good or bad. Angela was excited to help.

There’s no tension in her story. No unexpected turns or disappointments. You might even call it wonderfully boring. It’s just a woman in her early forties with three kids of her own and a great husband praising—or gushing about, really—her dad. I wish you could hear the enthusiasm in her tone.

Immanence and Transcendence

The first thing Angela talked about was how her father, a full-time pastor, worked hard to be *with* her and her siblings:

He always made time for us. He was available. He was at my piano competitions. He coached my basketball team. He was home for dinner. My school was across the street from the church where he pastors, and every other week he’d sign me out to have lunch with me. He was available and wanted to spend time with me. I in turn wanted to be with him.

We enjoy such stories—a father on a date with his daughter or investing himself in her pursuits—because we like the picture of someone *over* us stooping down to be *with* us.

Likewise, we like pictures of God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden or the Son of God becoming a baby in Bethlehem. We want a God who makes himself immanent. Who stoops down. Who draws near. Who attends to our concerns.

Yet don't miss the bigger picture: we enjoy *immanence* because it's set against *transcendence*, which is something we have a harder time liking. To speak of God's transcendence is to refer to the fact that he's over us and possesses all authority. He's high and holy. He can tell us what to do. Earthly fathers, too, possess a measure of transcendence, or authority, over their children. They establish the rules and set the boundaries.

You could hear Angela talk about her father's "transcendence"—his over-ness and authority—even in the way she said his name. Right after describing how he spent time with her, she also observed, "He was *daaaad* [she drew out her "a" like that], and what he said, we did. He put boundaries in place for us. If he said be home at ten, I knew I needed to."

Good authorities blend both postures, though they combine them differently depending on the role. A husband should offer his wife mostly immanence, while an army general will lean toward more transcendence. Angela's father, apparently, struck a good balance for a father. Right after referring to him setting boundaries, she continued, "But that was a positive thing, and I trusted him. I knew he set his boundaries in love."

How did you know he did that in love?

I just knew he was for me. I was really into music. He didn't know music or understand it at all. He was really into sports. Since I was tall, I wondered if, deep down, he wanted me to be a basketball or volleyball player. But in fact he never demonstrated the least bit of disappointment in me for doing what I wanted to do or was good at. Instead, he was proud of me. He supported me and showed up at everything.

In our flesh, we dislike the idea of someone else being "over" us. Yet when we know the authority figures love us, we more easily trust them. We can

recognize that having someone over us can be a source of blessing, even in their discipline of us.

To illustrate, Angela told a story from high school of going out with friends. Her father gave her an exact time to be home, but she didn't make it. He called the place where she said she would be, but she wasn't there. When she arrived home, she found a note waiting. It read, "Angela, I tried to find you. You were not available like you said you would be. I'm disappointed. I've taken the family, and we went to the coast." He had planned a surprise trip for the family to the beach, and she missed it. Her reaction?

I remember seeing the note and feeling crushed. Later, when the family got home, my dad didn't hammer the point. There was no scolding and no lecture. He knew missing the trip would be enough. And he was right: it crushed me to miss out on my dad's blessing, because he had built our family around a trust and a love of receiving his blessings.

That last line challenged me when she relayed the story. Have I taught my family to trust that my use of authority would lead to their blessing? Do my daughters connect *boundaries* and *blessings* like this? The comment also made me think of judgment day. How many people will discover that the very thing they despised—God's law—was given to them for their blessing?

Freedom, Empowerment, and Growth

Why exactly is authority a blessing? Because it grows us. That's the first purpose of authority to highlight in this chapter: *good authority grows and empowers those who are under it*. Hence, the apostle Paul refers to "the authority . . . the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down" (2 Cor. 13:10).

Our natural and shortsighted perspective is to equate authority with restrictions and the repression of growth. So say many teenagers to themselves: "Once I'm out of the house, I'll be able to do what I want and become the person I want to be." We think of authority and freedom, or authority and growth, as opposites. And there are more than enough bad authorities in this world to prove the point.

The teenager's impulse, moreover, is not entirely wrong. To possess authority is to possess freedom—the freedom to make decisions or exercise

power within a particular domain. And the parent possesses an authority and freedom in the home that the teenager doesn't possess. Indeed, the parent restricts the teenager's freedom in particular ways.

Yet the teenager who bucks the arrangement is being shortsighted. The very purpose of those restrictions is to draw the teenager, little by little, into the parent's own freedom and authority—into mature adulthood. A good parent wants the teenager to experience freedom and to exercise authority, but to employ both of those gifts responsibly and morally.

So it is in every domain of authority and leadership. Your goal should be to lift people up. Human beings don't grow only when freed from restrictions. We also grow when restrictions are placed upon us, like wooden stakes strengthening saplings, or rose bushes sprouting when trimmed. Likewise, children gain wisdom from study. Runners run faster from drills. Employees become managers through training. Obedience, discipline, and boundaries teach. They strengthen. "You cannot learn without obedience," one elementary school teacher said, reflecting on her classroom.

Yet good authority nearly always offers a blend of transcendence and immanence. The one *over* us in wisdom and authority draws *near* to us and says, "Do what I do. Follow me." And by following, we acquire wisdom. We grow to be like the one we're following.

Pretend Michelangelo is your art teacher. How will you learn to paint like he paints? In the beginning, you learn by training and disciplining your brush to do what his brush does. You conform your eye and hand to his. Then, that mastered, you possess all the freedom of the master himself. You can do as he does. Or you can paint in your own style, but with all his skill.

This theme of growth and empowerment ran through everything Angela said. Her dad empowered her, encouraged her, made her strong. This came through especially as she talked about the double blessing of his being not just a dad but her pastor:

Not only was he a humble, strong father, but he did it while being a pastor. It was a double encouragement. His role as father shaped me. And so did his role as pastor. Those two things worked favorably in my life.

As my pastor, he encouraged me in my personal walk with the Lord. I don't know how he did it, but his encouragement never felt like it was

for his own benefit or his own renown in the church, as if he were afraid of people saying, “The pastor better have kids who are walking with the Lord.” Rather, he simply encouraged us to read our Bibles and be at church.

Then I remember being excited to take the church membership class, which he taught, when I was 16. I was able to ask questions on my own two feet. It felt empowering. I didn't feel compelled to be a certain way because he was the pastor. Yet his leadership was alluring to me. Somehow he provoked in me a desire to know the Lord and to be a part of the church and to know what Scripture says.

It takes skill or wisdom to simultaneously lead people in the right direction, while also letting them figure out their direction on their own. It's hard to know how much transcendence and how much immanence to offer. Does the cookbook call for one cup of each, or a cup of one and half a cup of the other? In fact, different moments call for different ratios. And a wise father knows that the older and stronger and more mature his daughter becomes, the more he will lean toward immanence:

As I got older, my dad would parent with questions—like Jesus, who asked a lot of questions. By asking questions, he was able to lead me without a heavy hand, letting me put the pieces together myself. And by leading with questions, I never felt like he was overbearing. Instead, he gave me space to process things with him, and I knew it was a safe space to process—safe because he didn't need me to be a certain way or look a certain way. I knew he loved me and was for my good.

In these comments, you hear a theme that's going to surface several times in this book: the generosity of good authority. Good human authority doesn't strive to continually remind you of the hierarchy, but typically aspires for equality, even when the formal hierarchies remain enduring. It exists not to serve itself, but to grant freedom, power, wisdom, and growth in those it serves. It works to draw people up *into* itself—so that they can do what the person in authority does.

“Let me play the piano scale; now you imitate me and do the same.”

“I'll swing the golf club; now you hold it and swing it.”

“I'll walk in righteousness and love; now you follow me.”

Something else you hear in Angela's comments: the person in authority, also, is being trained. As Angela's father exercised authority, he also was learning to be like Jesus. If the first purpose of authority is to grow the one we're leading, the second purpose is *to grow ourselves as we lead*.

Good authority benefits not only the one under it, but the one in it. It gives us the opportunity to be like God—a ruler who rules.

Sharing Rule and Glory

Which brings us back to God's authority. How does God rule? He ruled by giving Adam and Eve rule, so that they might share in his rule. To them he said, "fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" (Gen. 1:28). The psalmist, meditating on this creation moment, responded in amazement:

what is man that you are mindful of him,
 and the son of man that you care for him?
 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
 and crowned him with glory and honor.
 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under his feet. (Ps. 8:4–6)

God has all things under his feet, but he puts them under ours. He deserves all glory and honor, but he shares that glory with us. He crowns us—makes us kings—with glory and honor.

God is nothing if not generous. In fact, his generosity is beyond reckoning. Creation exists because God wanted to share—not just his stuff, but his rule and glory.

By giving us authority, he gives us the opportunity to grow and train and become like him. The Creator teaches us to be creators, the Ruler equips us to be rulers. He created us in his image in order to image him and his rule.

People might hate authority, but God gave authority to humanity precisely so that we might grow to be like him. The devil played Adam and Eve for suckers when he promised they could be "like God" by disobeying. The opposite was true. We learn to be like God by obeying him, which means ruling like he rules.

As Angela watched her dad exercise this kind of generous empowering authority in her life, she couldn't help but want to know God. Her conclu-

sion to our conversation: “One of the greatest gifts I have, one of the kindest things God has done for me, is to give me a relationship with an earthly father who made a relationship with the heavenly Father enticing, who made me long for it.”

How I long for my four daughters, now in their teens, to speak that way of me when they're in their forties. And so with my wife. And so with the members of my church as well as anyone who works under me. I hope it's your prayer for your life, too.

King David's Last Words

King David, who knew a little something about authority, captured the life-creating power of good authority in his final words:

Now these are the last words of David: . . .

“When one rules justly over men,
ruling in the fear of God,
he dawns on them like the morning light,
like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,
like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.”

(2 Sam. 23:1, 3–4)

Picture it. Rain falls on a field of grass. Then the sun emerges and warms the field. Each blade of grass then traps the energy of the sun and uses it to convert the water offered by the rain, together with carbon dioxide, into a sugar. That sugar, once broken down, grows and repairs the grass. Then you and I can look and behold a field of vibrant green. Good authority is like that sun and like that rain, says David. It gives power to the lives of others. It authors growth. Which is what we heard as Angela talked about her father.

This, as I said, is the first purpose of authority—to author life in others so that they might eventually share in that authority. As mentioned in the introduction, you see it in the word: author-ity.

So think: where do you have authority at work? Maybe it's the authority to answer the phone. Or the authority to hire and fire. Or the authority to choose a new logo for the organization. Now ask yourself: what are you

using that authority for? To enrich yourself, or to author life in others and teach them to do what you do?

Yet as you seek to benefit others, you, too, grow. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). The second purpose of authority, as I said a moment ago, is to *grow yourself, if you’re the person in authority*. Every human being exercising authority will learn and grow in the process of leading. We learn the skills of leading and creating, and perhaps more crucially we learn the skills of giving and sharing. Good authority strives to delegate and to pass out power, which means that exercising authority trains us to share in rule and even in glory, as God does with us. When we use authority like this, we train ourselves to become like God—his priestly kings who mediate his rule over creation.

The third purpose of authority is closely related to the first two: *authority creates groups of people and gives them an assignment*. To have a soccer team, someone has to say, “These people are the team, and this is how to play.” To have family, someone has to say, “This is what a family is, and these are its members.” So it is with every group, whether a school, a company, a team, a farm, a marriage, a church, an army, a nation. Some type of authority must bind people together, name them as members, and give them a purpose. With a soccer team it might be the coach. With a church it might be every member establishing themselves by covenant. Yet the existence of any group—formal or informal—depends on someone saying, “This is who we are; this is what we do.” To hate authority, finally, is to hate creation, and in particular it’s to hate the creation of groups of people doing things together. God the ruler creates, and the creator rules. Likewise with us, when we image him.

People think of authority as a zero-sum proposition: more for you means less for me. Yet good authority creates more for everyone. That’s what authors and creators do: create!

Defining Authority

We have yet to define authority. What exactly is it?

Distinguishing authority from power helps answer that question. Power is the ability or capacity to do something—the ability, say, to pick up a boulder or solve a math problem or fix a leaky faucet. Authority, on the other hand, is *the moral right or license* to make decisions with that power.

It is an *authorization* to do something. What's more, to have authority, someone must *authorize* you to do whatever they want you to do. There must be a granting agent.

At age 15, my daughter had the power to drive a car. She could physically do it. Yet she could not do it legally because she had not been authorized. At age 16, she passed a driving test, and the Maryland Motor Vehicle Authority gave her a driver's license. That license represents her authority to drive a car on public roads.

Furthermore, every authority or authorization has boundaries or limits. These boundaries are tied to the purpose for which the authorization is given. My daughter, for instance, was given the authority to drive a car, not a motorcycle or an eighteen-wheeler semitrailer truck. Both of these would require an additional license or authorization.

In other words, when you're given the authority over something, you have the authority only over that *something*, not over *anything* and *everything* you want. Your moral right to make decisions or give commands falls inside certain boundaries, or what we might call a jurisdiction. Think of Jesus's reference to "a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch" (Mark 13:34 NIV). God hasn't put anyone in charge of everything, only some things—an "assigned task."

Therefore, when we get to the later chapters on the authority of the husband, parent, elder, and so on, we will need to ask the question each time, "What's the purpose of this authorization? What's the assigned task?" Answering those questions will help us determine each jurisdiction, as well as what is and what is not a legitimate assertion of authority in each case.

For instance, the police have been authorized to enforce the speed limit. They can pull my daughter over if she's speeding, and she's morally and legally obliged to pull over if she sees those flashing lights in her rearview mirror. That's within the policeman's jurisdiction. Yet suppose the police officer walked up to her window and told her she had to marry his son, who goes to the same school as her and has a crush on her. Clearly, that would be well outside of the officer's jurisdiction. I would say to him, "Excuse me?!"

As I said in the introduction, the Creator alone has absolute and comprehensive authority. His authority *is*. He can tell us what to eat, what to wear, whom we can or cannot sleep with, and how to worship. His authority is

not subject to judicial review or a job termination because we didn't put him in office. We might ignore him for a while, but we cannot vote him out. He possesses an intrinsic moral right to rule, make judgments, and exercise power. Like an author who writes whatever he pleases, so the author of all creation has all author-ity over what he has made.

Human authority, on the other hand, is always relative. It is not something we *are*. It is something we must *be given*.¹ It's an office we must step into—whether the office of parent, husband, citizen, church member, pastor/elder, policeman, congressman, judge, teacher, airline pilot, tollbooth operator, and so forth.

Authority as an Office

I like the word “office” when talking about authority. It functions like an X-ray machine that helps us see the skeletal or institutional structures that define various kinds of relationships. To say “Michael is Cecelia's father” is to define the relationship between Michael and Cecelia. It shapes the identity of each, and assigns a set of obligations, responsibilities, and powers to each. To speak a little more technically for just a second, the idea of an office communicates the fact that

- authority is not intrinsic to a person but comes from a granting agent;
- one's authority serves a particular purpose or scope;
- it carries certain responsibilities and a code of ethics;
- it is a stewardship possessing a limited jurisdiction and duration;
- it is given to specific individuals and not to everyone.

Insofar as authority exists as an office, we can discern the subtle difference between the ideas of authority and leadership. When we talk about leadership, we're often focusing on an actor, not an office. Hence, I heard my wife, an elementary school teacher, recently say to the parents of one of her students, “He's a natural leader.” What she meant was, the boy in question possesses the social intelligence and gifts of charisma which

1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48.

cause other students to follow him, whether on a classroom project or in a game on the playground. It doesn't mean he possesses formal authority. He could possess authority only if my wife were to grant it to him, say, by making him a line leader.

When a natural leader leads, there might be natural consequences for failing to follow, but there is no moral obligation to follow. When a person holds a position of formal authority, however, there are moral obligations to submit or follow. It is wrong not to follow. Which is why I defined authority as a moral license to make decisions or give commands.

The same difference abides between the ideas of authority and influence. Influence is a type of power, which means a person may have it whether or not they possess the moral right to that influence.

That said, I will use the ideas of leadership and authority synonymously for the rest of this book. It's easier to say "leader" instead of saying "person in a position of authority" every time.

Authority Teaches Us about Goodness and God

There's one last purpose for authority, which was implied earlier but is worth making explicit: *exercising authority teaches people what God is like*. I can explain this in one of two ways. I can talk like a philosopher and say that authority teaches us the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, true and untrue, holy and profane. Or I can talk like a theologian and say authority teaches us about God, since God is the source of all that's right, good, worthy, true, and holy.

Let me start as a philosopher. Authority exists because morality and truth exist, and because meaning and value and purposefulness and glory and beauty exist. Authority is the moral requirement that comes with the existence of all of these things. In a universe with no universal or shared values or meanings or truths or goodnesses, then we can do away with authority. But if there are values and truths and meanings we wish to protect and uphold, then authority must exist. We have rules about stealing because property is valuable. We outlaw murder because human life is precious. We restrict physical intimacy to marriage because the union of a man and a woman is precious.

To decry all expressions of authority and the rules they enjoin, then, is to decry all meaning, value, truth, beauty, and goodness. Such a dismissal

leaves life completely at the whims of every passing fancy that wayward hearts might spontaneously conceive. However, to reserve a place for authority, even amid its dangers, is to step out in faith and to insist that this universe must have meaning and value, glory and beauty, waiting to be fully revealed.

Now let me talk like a theologian. Unlike he did with the animals, God created humans in his image (noun) so that we can image (verb) him as we rule over creation. He made us representatives (noun) so that we can represent (verb). As I said a moment ago, he doesn't just make us kings, he makes us priest kings, because priests mediate. Our rule should mediate or represent his rule. When we rule like he rules, we show the cosmos what he is like. In one sense, human authority is nothing more or less than human choice or agency. God licensed us to make choices, and to make choices according to the principles of his righteousness or law. In that way, as we exercise dominion over the earth, we look like him.

God says, "Watch how I speak—truthfully and lovingly. Now you do it, too." So then we open our mouths to talk. What comes out? Is it truth and love? If so, we represent him rightly, and we tell the world around us that God is a God of truth and love. If instead we lie with our words, we teach the world around us that God lies.

God says, "Watch how I act—righteously and for the good of others." Our actions, too, must then be righteous and for the good of others. If we're selfish, we teach people that God is selfish.

In short, people sometimes wonder if human hierarchies issue from the fall. Yet in fact the issue of authority goes to the heart of your existence and mine. You and I were created to rule, and part of that rule involves shaping and training others so that they, in time, can rule, too. Good authority grows those beneath it. And it grows the person in authority to become more like God. It creates groups of people. Not only that, but every time we use our authority correctly we both teach theology and affirm that good and true things exist in this universe. We're telling the world what God is like, and that he created a good world, even if rebellion exists. When we rule like he rules, we teach. When we pervert his rule, we teach. But we're always teaching. That's what it means to be made in God's image. The very structure of human existence serves this theology-teaching purpose.

Table 1.1: Four Purposes of Authority

1. Grow those under it
2. Grow those in it
3. Create groups
4. Teach what God is like

Conclusion

All these definitions and explanations, hopefully, help explain why Angela's experience of being under a godly, wise, and loving father provoked the desire in her to know her heavenly Father. Her dad wonderfully imaged or represented God's own love and rule in Angela's life. He served as a pointer to the Almighty.

Not surprisingly, Angela's father is himself devoted to God's word. Angela remarked, "My dad is a wise man. He studies Scripture. And out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. His wisdom is from God and God's word." In that regard, he's like the Israelite king we considered in the introduction, whom God commanded "to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law" and "to read it all the days of his life."

In general, good authority helps lead people to God, while bad authority can cause people to doubt or even despise God. Good authority creates life and more authority. Bad authority kills both life and authority itself. I'd guess that most people haven't had a dad as good as Angela's. Yet God has provided in his word pictures of such good authority that we can all learn from. Before we turn to the bad in the next chapter, take a final moment to reflect on the good. How do you see God exercising his authority in Genesis 1 and 2? Perhaps, before you do anything else, you should stop and whisper a word of praise. Isn't he good?