

RELATIVE SUBJECTION TO RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” – *Romans 13:1*

The above words of the Apostle Paul are directed primarily to governmental authorities, those who have the right to ‘bear the sword’ and ‘avenge’ injustice (*Romans 13:4*) for the purpose of keeping order. And as Paul wrote, their authority is **relative**, meaning it is subject to a supreme authority – the **absolute** authority of God. But the principle of relative authority extends beyond the governments. It applies in all organizational arrangements whether they be in government, in the workplace, in the home, even in religious associations. As such, we all find ourselves subject to two types of authorities simultaneously. We can be loyal and obedient to relative authorities, but unconditional **absolute** loyalty and obedience is due only to God.

Unfortunately, the principle of relative authority and relative subjection has been distorted in the religious context. Some religious authorities have encroached upon the absolute authority of God, claiming themselves worthy of absolute subjection and unquestioned obedience from its members. They assert this authority under the misunderstood guise of Theocracy.

The Pretext of Theocracy

Those who assert their authority by way of theocracy define theocracy as ‘God rule’ by way of semantics – ‘theo’ meaning God and ‘cracy’ meaning government. They believe that their authority is divinely appointed whereby they are authorized to receive absolute and unconditional subjection from its members. This is gross error on so many levels. Let us consider a few of those levels.

First, theocracy is a qualifying and delimiting term. This means that it does not refer to all authority; it only refers to a segment of authority that can be isolated from other types of authority. The use of the term inherently recognizes other types of authorities, i.e., democracies, aristocracies, meritocracies, that are different and distinct from theocracy. Whereas the authority of God is absolute and all encompassing. It is without limitation, without qualification or definition, and it itself overshadows all other types of authority. A theocracy does not. No theocracy claims worldwide authority over everyone and everything on the face of the earth and in the heavens; whereas God rule does.

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, **from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.**”
– *Ephesians 3:14-15*

We might look at God’s authority as a pie, and theocracy, democracy, etc., as slices of the pie. Accordingly, theocracy is also a relative authority, not absolute or the equivalent of ‘God rule.’

Second, theocracy is carried out by imperfect and fallible men, thus their rulership is imperfect and fallible. This point alone demonstrates that a theocracy is not divine rulership. A theocracy can, and does, err. We need only to look at the history of so-called theocracies and see how many times they changed their doctrines and theologies that they once heralded as the word of God, how many times they changed their opinions of certain people whom they once either extolled or condemned, and how many times they came to accept the very thing they opposed and judged as evil in prior years.

Truly, absolute subjection to an inferior authority will only lead its subjects to a dead end:

“Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.” – *Psalms 146:3-4*

On the other hand, God-rule is perfect, complete and error-free. It is headed by an eternal and perfect being and it's decrees are everlasting and unchanging.

“Because God wanted to make **the unchanging nature of his purpose** very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, **by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.” – *Hebrews 6:17-18*

Nevertheless, man's **understanding** of the everlasting and unchanging doctrines is progressive, hence the danger of giving absolute obedience and loyalty to a theocracy!

Third, theocracy is more accurately defined as ‘priest-rule’ in that those who operate a theocracy are of a priestly or priest-like class. No theocracy is run by common laymen, otherwise it would be called a democracy. It is important to note that a theocracy in itself is not an invalid or disapproved authority. A religious association requires some type of oversight or administration. It is a valid relative authority.

“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” – *Hebrews 13:17*

However, a so-called theocracy also has the most potential for insidious and reprehensible behavior. One need only look at what has been perpetrated in the name of religion. Some of the most heinous crimes in history have been, and are being, committed at the direction of some type of theocracy. The first century Jewish religious leaders were one type of insidious theocracy:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, **you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you**, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were

not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.”
– *Matthew 23:37-38*

The Apostle Paul wrote about another such theocracy in his letter to the brothers in Thessalonica:

“Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and **will exalt himself over everything** that is called God or is worshiped, so that **he sets himself up in God’s temple**, proclaiming himself to be God. Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?” – *2 Thessalonians 2:3-5*

So while an organization of religious leaders can justifiably claim that their rulership is a theocracy, we must understand what a theocracy is. It is priest rule, not God rule and therefore, we must be ever on guard against its potential for error. Those who seek perfect divine guidance must go to the source and follow its leadings above and beyond any claims of inspired direction by men or theocracies.

The Absolute Authority Given to Jesus

The Father alone is the absolute one with unquestioned authority and due unquestioned loyalty and obedience. He was not given this authority, nor did He have to earn it. He always had it by virtue of the fact that He exists. He is the source of all authority and He alone decides to whom and how much of it He gives.

“The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that **the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone** he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.” – *Daniel 4:17*

As noted above, the Father gave relative authority over various areas of human life to men. But to His son, Christ Jesus, He gave absolute authority over everything in this universe.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. **He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him.** His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” – *Daniel 7:13-14*

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “**All authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” – *Matthew 28:18*

“And his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, **far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.** And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” – *Ephesians 1:19-23*

Of course, this is with the exception of the Father Himself. In other words, Jesus was not given authority over the Father.

“For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, **it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ.**”
– *1 Corinthians 15:27*

But over every democracy, every theocracy, every form of government or authority, Jesus has absolute authority. He has not given up that authority to men. He remains in that capacity down to this day in spite of whatever theocrats may claim. At best, man has been given a ministry, a commission to spread Jesus’ absolute authority to the ends of the earth. This commission carries with it relative authority to administer and oversee procedural matters. But it does not allow men to establish new rules or teachings that contradict, circumvent or override those of Jesus. And whenever such a conflict does arise, relative subjection **requires** the subjects to ignore the relative authority on that issue.

For example, Jesus taught:

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and **you are all brothers.** And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ **for you have one Father,** and he is in heaven.” – *Matthew 23:8-9*

“Yet to **all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God**— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” – *John 1:12-13*

However, when men teach that only 144,000 are brothers and the rest are friends, or that God is the Father only of 144,000 and friend to the rest, they are overstepping and invalidating Jesus’ authority. Such conflicting teachings by men or theocracies should be ignored.

Jesus also taught:

“Jesus said to them, “**Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in**

you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” – John 6:53-54

But when men teach that only 144,000 can eat and drink Jesus’ symbolic flesh and blood, they are overstepping and invalidating Jesus’ authority. Such conflicting teachings of men or theocracies should again be ignored.

Jesus taught:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.** “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; **take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.**”

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels.” – *Matthew 25:31-34, 41*

But when men teach that most of those approved by God do not inherit the kingdom, but can live on the earth as a third option, they are overstepping and invalidating Jesus’ authority. Such conflicting teachings of men or theocracies should likewise be ignored.

It is the same with the illustration of the ‘wheat and the weeds.’ (*Matthew 13:24-30*) If the wheat are the anointed Christians and the weeds are false Christians, who are the ones with the ‘earthly hope?’ Where do they make a showing? Jesus repeatedly illustrated only two destinies – life in heaven or everlasting death. He **never** presented a third option!

Further, Jesus taught:

“**I am the gate;** whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” – *John 10:9*

“**I am the good shepherd;** I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” – *John 10:14*

“**I am the way** and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” – *John 14:6*

But when men claim to be ‘the way’ to salvation or ‘the ark of salvation’ such that the only way to get saved is to be in association with them, they are overstepping and invalidating Jesus’ authority and their worship is in vain. (*Matthew 15:9*)

The Protection of Relative Subjection

When Jesus left earth and returned to heaven, he did not leave us alone to the authority of men. He sent a divine helper to be with us and to guide us to all truth:

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, **he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own**; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. **He will glorify me** because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.” – *John 16:12-14*

We wrote about this extensively in articles such as **Lastly He Sent His Son** and **The Reality of the Spirit of Truth**. We notice that this divine helper does not try to usurp Jesus’ teachings or his authority. He speaks only what Jesus gave him to speak – his plain and open teachings. Therefore, if a divine guide will not add on ideas originating from ‘his own impulse,’ how much more so should human guides likewise refrain. There is practical, as well as everlasting, value in appreciating the relative authority of men, especially in the area of religion.

When we properly understand the difference between relative and absolute subjection, we are protected from abuse and lasting harm because abuse arises mostly in the context of mistaken and misplaced authority.

In the home, spousal abuse arises only when one spouse has assume more authority than he or she has rightly been given, and when the other spouse subjects him or herself to the improperly assumed authority as though it were absolute. True, in the family arrangement, God has given the greater accountability to the husband. But that is a duty and an obligation, not a privilege or a reward. He is obligated to treat his wife with special consideration with the same love and support as Christ treats the congregation.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” – *Ephesians 5:25-27*

Also, in general, children are subject to adults, but that subjection is also relative.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise— “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of **the Lord**.” – *Ephesians 6:1-4*

Abuse of children arises when adults assume more authority than they are rightly given, and when children are not taught the meaning and application of relative subjection. Children are the weakest member of civilized society. For that reason, they must be taught that they do not owe every adult absolute obedience. They owe them respect, but they can be taught to respectfully decline an adult's improper authority. How much sexual abuse of children could be avoided if our children are taught relative subjection!

And in the congregation, relative subjection can prevent all types of religious abuse. When members do not allow themselves to be mesmerized by a claim of divine authority by a theocracy, they can act in their own best interests, while at the same time giving proper respect to those taking the lead. (*Hebrews 13:7*) While a congregation overseer has authority to make sure the meetings take place decently and by arrangement (*1 Corinthians 14:40*), they are not the masters over the member's faith.

“I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but **we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.” – *2 Corinthians 1:23-24***

Those taking the lead are not authorized to demand absolute or unquestioned obedience. Those men who do expect unquestioned obedience are snatching away your spiritual freedom and revealing a weakness in their own spirit. They are openly establishing that they do not understand relative subjection and that they have not subjected themselves absolutely to the Christ!

When men demand unquestioned loyalty and obedience, those subject to that authority must ask themselves, Is it worth it? The Father has promised everlasting life to those who exclusively obey Christ Jesus.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever **believes in him shall not perish but have **eternal life**.” – *John 3:16***

“For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and **believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” – *John 6:40***

“Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” – *John 17:3*

“Very truly I tell you, whoever **hears my word and **believes** him who sent me **has eternal life** and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” – *John 5:24***

But what does a man or a body of men offer for unquestioned obedience to them? Of course, those who are willing to give unquestioned obedience will be in good standing in the eyes

of those men and they may be given certain privileges and honors. But what if their direction and guidance is wrong? Will they be able to compensate you for your loss? What promises or guarantees does a theocracy offer that could be equal to what the Father offers? What powers do they have to fulfill their promises? Can they appeal to God on your behalf and explain away your misstep? Jesus said:

“Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” – *Matthew 15:14*

Blind leaders will be in no better position than those who followed them into the pit. They will not be able to offer everlasting life to themselves let alone others, nor will they be in a position to plead on your behalf. How foolish to trust your everlasting salvation to a self-proclaimed theocracy that has no authority or power to save even themselves!

How much wiser to respond as did Peter and the apostles when confronted with the commands of a relative religious authority:

“The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” Peter and the other apostles replied: “**We must obey God rather than human beings!** The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” – *Acts 5:27-32*

Better to stay loyal to the Father’s absolute authority and respectfully reject any presumptuous demands for allegiance from a theocracy!

Honoring One’s Relative Authority

All those in positions of oversight must take stock of their own faith and realize that they are appointed to serve, not to command. They should be cautious about interfering in the faith of another, or demanding unquestioned allegiance and obedience. Otherwise, they may find themselves opposers actually against God.

“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” – *Acts 5:38-39*

The directions given or teachings rendered by religious authorities should be administered by those who understand fully the responsibility of oversight and their relative authority. As long as they remain fallible, imperfect and subject to change, they must bear in mind the cost of stumbling one of the little ones or the ‘least of those’ (*Matthew 25:40, 45*) over whom they have authority.

“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. **“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”** – *Matthew 18:4-6*

Those taking the lead must have deep respect for those who willingly give attention to their relative authority and must always be mindful not to infringe upon personal choice and the allowance of spiritual freedom that the Father has so freely given all. They must remember that the Spirit of Truth was poured ‘upon every sort of flesh’ (*Acts 2:17*), not just the ones taking the lead, according to the capacity of each one to understand. What a blessing and honor to have at our side the Father’s perfect channel, His flawless helper, and His infallible comforter.

A proper view of their relative authority will give birth to a mutual and sincere search for absolute truth. That approach in and of itself breeds humility for both the authoritative figure and the willing and attentive student as each person understands that he will render an accounting for his actions in connection with the Kingdom. As a result, a spiritual brotherhood arises where the fruitage of the spirit and the law of the Christ reigns supreme in the hearts of all who submit to his God-given absolute authority.

The Father has granted absolute authority over the affairs of man to his son, Christ Jesus. Jesus has not delegated that authority to any man or body of men. Jesus continues active and involved in the lives of those who honor him. (*Matthew 18:20; 28:18-20*) The highest regard that the Father’s children can give to the Father is to recognize the difference between relative and absolute authority, knowing that absolute always trumps relative whether in government, in the work place, in the home, or in the congregation. And they must demand and give **only** relative loyalty and obedience to men and organizations if they are to honor the Father's perfect will and purpose.

To all who honor the Father in this way, we welcome your comments.

“Elaia Luchnia”