

# Exercising Authority

Why do leaders exercise authority? What enables or works against the healthy use of authority in Christian leadership? This session will examine how a biblical worldview shapes the way we make decisions and how we can lead well when we lack formal authority.

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## 1. Introduction

God didn't give us others to dominate them but to mould us. Not to mould them as I wish. In their freedom from me, they reflect God’s image. Freedom of the other is a burden I must take up. I must not seek to stamp my image on them but to allow God to form them in his image. This is the dignity of createdness *in Imago Dei*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

### What is authority?

Distinct from power (the capacity to do something), authority is the moral right or licence to make decisions with the power and capacity that we have. Every authority or authorisation (“office”) has boundaries, which are tied to the purpose for which authority has been granted. So key questions are always “What’s the assigned task of this role?” and “What’s the purpose of this authorisation?”. (Adapted from Leeman, J. *Authority* 2023).

## 2. Locating ourselves and our authority in the story of redemption

We must pay attention to where we are in the whole story of redemption as we think about exercising authority:

Authority as intended in CREATION: Good	Authority as experienced after the FALL: Bad	Authority as restored in REDEMPTION: Complex*	Authority as we look forward to the NEW CREATION: Good
Supplying	Stealing	Sacrificial	Sublime

\*‘Complex’ means that it includes elements of both the good and the bad.

In between the fall and the new creation, we seek to bless those God has given us to lead, whilst wrestling daily with the reality that both we and the people we lead still live with the ongoing effects of sin in our hearts and lives. That’s why exercising (and responding to) authority is so hard!

### **Features of good authority** (*this may have been covered in session 1*)

- Is not intrinsic but granted (so there has to be a granting agent)
- Has a specific purpose
- Has a bounded scope (jurisdiction and duration)
- Carries responsibilities and obligations
- Carries a code of ethics.
- Is a stewardship, not an ownership

### **3. Before we exercise authority, we exercise submission**

Gen 2:15-17

Phil 2:5-8

The good response to good authority is submission. But why is submission a good thing?:

- It reflects the likeness of Jesus
- It is the path to our growth
- It prepares us for exercising authority in turn
- It is never unconditional; submission always has limits

### **4. Exercising good authority in the now-but-not-yet**

#### **Purposes of good authority:**

- Forms and enables groups (enables community collaboration and contribution)
- Protects the vulnerable
- Grows those in authority
- Grows those under authority
- Nurtures others to be ready to hold authority
- Teaches what God is like, including:
  - Transcendent AND Immanent
  - Ordered AND Personal

#### **What does the exercise of good authority look like (and what is it not)?**

- Always submits to a higher authority (is never unaccountable)
- Creates life (does not steal it)
- Seeks wisdom (is not unteachable)
- Administers discipline (is neither permissive nor authoritarian)
- Bears the cost (is not self-protective)

### **5. What about discipline?**

Without the power of discipline, our exercise of authority is toothless. **But** the permissions we have to discipline vary: Throughout scripture, different kinds of ‘office’ come with different permissions in how authority and the related discipline can be exercised.

Jonathan Leeman (*Authority*, 2023) differentiates between the powers of Counsel and Command:

**Counsel:** holding a role of authority with a right to ‘bind the conscience’ but little to no power to determine or enact consequences. Authority here operates through relationship and trust (noting that Christ never forces us to obey and follow him, but rather invites us). Respects those they lead as their equals. Quickly forgoes their rights.

**Command:** the power both to ask for obedience and enforce it, and to cause consequences for disobedience.

Leeman then places these five ‘offices’ on a spectrum of immanence and transcendence, highlighting the ‘lightness of hand’ with which authority should be exercised in each case:

Counsel			Command			
<i>Greater emphasis on Immanence</i>	Husbands	Individual Elders	Parents	Elder team or whole Church	Gov'ts	<i>Greater emphasis on Transcendence</i>
Posture or permission:	Invite	Encourage	Recommend	Urge	Require	

*Activity: working through examples.*

## 6. Leading organisations: exercising authority in the workplace

What might a distinctively Christian approach to exercising authority in a workplace look like?

*Be careful about directly applying the bible’s teaching on slaves and masters to the modern workplace: In most European contexts there are employment laws and contracts which govern the employer-employee relationship and which significantly moderate the exercise of authority and discipline.*

- *Employers have contractual rights and obligations. They can expect certain behaviours in return for a salary. They can penalise employees. They can also be penalised for misusing authority or harming the rights of the employee.*
- *Employees have contractual rights and obligations. They can be disciplined for poor performance or behaviour; they can complain and sometimes be compensated for wrong treatment*

What does good authority in the workplace look like?

### Applying the principles:

How do you (and the organisation you lead) measure up?

- There are visible accountability structures which people know how to access (e.g. a board of trustees; policies and channels for raising concerns)

- The accountability structure(s) and the culture through which they operate are capable of exercising discipline including over the most senior member of staff.
- It is clear to others, through visible structures, your speech and your behaviours, that you know yourself to be accountable to an overseeing person or authority.
- You are known for seeking out the input of others, both internally and externally in your decision making.
- People would not be surprised if you apologised for messing up on something because this is a characteristic behaviour of yours.
- People who work for you have gone on to accomplish more than they might have thought possible because they grew under your leadership.
- People can point to difficult conversations you've been willing to have and difficult decisions you've been willing to take.
- People are confident that you will confront bad behaviour and address poor performance.
- People have seen or directly experienced you acting sacrificially, taking on a cost or experiencing a disadvantage for the sake of the organisation, a team or an individual.
- People know that when you raise issues about their performance they will be supported and helped to learn and change.

### **Application session:**

#### **Reflection and group coaching (Part 2)**

##### Individual reflection (10 mins):

- Reflect on how authority is understood, exercised and valued in your leadership context.
- Explore how your own 'prism' (especially in relation to authority) plays into that.
- Evaluate your context more critically: What is healthy and needs affirmation? What is unhealthy and needs attending to?
- What would one step healthier look like?

##### Small Groups (60 mins)

- Go round the group and share brief summary of (a) descriptions of authority in your context (2-3 mins each). Remember to note and appreciate the insights from comparing attitudes to different contexts.
- Spend 10 mins per person: share one thing you'd like to work on to make your own exercise of authority, or the exercise of authority in your organisation, one step healthier..