New Testament Limits of Authority and Hierarchical Power

We should not try to apply modern sociological terms to ministries in the New Testament church.

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Editor’s note: The author has described this final study in his three-part series as “the most consequential but telling issue of authority.” Parts I and II were published previously in the Winter 2000 and Spring 2001 issues.

There are six evident restrictions on authority that Christ the Head authorized and that apostolic missionaries set in motion in the New Testament house churches. These biblical boundaries of authority (exousia) unveil the extent to which complementarians practice masculine domination among God’s people.

Christ’s absolute authority

First, the only authority to which every believer must submit is the absolute authority of Jesus the Lord. There is no other name of authority, and he has no intermediaries. Jesus the Lord possesses “all authority” (Matt. 28:18). Exousia carries the idea of power based on right, whereas dynamis suggests “being able” in virtue of an ability. “According to the Gospels, in Jesus exousia and dynamis converge.” 1 He taught “as one having authority,” which extended over all the powers of the enemy in executing judgment and casting into hell. He forgave sins with his power, and cast out demons and healed.

Believers are given authority to become children of God (John 1:12) and have access “in Jesus’ name” to Christ’s high priestly authority (cf. Hebrews). In spite of that, whatever contrived “freedom” believers may boast of having (“this exousia of yours,” 1 Cor 8:9; 6:12), in Paul’s biting wordplay he reprimands authority-rights boasters that their worst self-deception is in their own enslavement to exousia itself.2 Here, then, is a piercing apostolic warning to every believer hankering for personal authority.

Notice that Christ’s authority is never attached to his masculinity. “The fact that Jesus was male, the fact that he was a Jew . . . all these are secondary to the fact that God took upon himself human nature.”3 There is no biblical comment about his maleness simply because it is “accidental” (incidental) to his person as the Christ.4 The Scriptures focus on his human nature (cf. NLT: John 1:14; Phil. 2:7; Col. 2:9), which enables him to represent all “humankind” (male and female, Gen. 1:27).

In the circumstances of the times, however, Jesus’ maleness did provide the cultural and historical vehicle needed since “only a male could have offered the radical critique of the power systems of his day.”5 Attaching salvational significance to gender implies that men more closely represent God’s image, so that women require salvational-mediatorial male headship. However, there is no hint that Jesus is Lord over males to an exclusion of females, or that his authority over men is different in any way from his authority over women.

Apostolic authority

Second, the apostles’ authority was foundational in establishing the New Testament house churches, and their permanent authority is now concretized in our New Testament canon. They have no apostolic successors. Jesus promised his Spirit would guide the apostles “into all the truth” (John 16:13–14). And he did, and his promise was verified in the completed writing of our New Testament and its inclusion in our canon of Scripture.6 Christ delegated apostolic authority to the apostles, and each generation of believers since participates in apostolic continuity by submitting to the apostles’ authoritative teaching (Acts 2:42). Postapostolic “sees” or seats of authority quickly evolved, claiming to be of apostolic origin and status equal with Scriptures. The result was theological duplicity and ecclesial syncretism. All claims of apostolic or popery succession to the original apostles are spurious.

Authority in the church

Third, church leaders are nowhere given authority or instructed to exercise authority over the people of God. No Christian has an inherent right to control another in Christ’s church. Most of our contemporary assumptions of authority and power derive from Max Weber’s sociological typology (1947, 1967). More recently, in Paul and Power, Bengt Holmberg attempts to adapt Weber’s typology into “the Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles.” But in his pursuit of a Pauline, theological-sociological paradigm of power, Holmberg faces a dilemma, and so he reads much more into Paul’s letters about power than can possibly be read out of them.7

Complications arise when an attempt is made to apply modern sociological terms to ministries in the New Testament church. Walter Liefeld exhibits keen insight in this regard when he argues that we need a greater precision in understanding the spheres of influence meant when the New Testament uses the word authority. Regarding the
authority debate of pastoral teaching, Liefeld asserts: “Yet (1) apart from the debatable passage in 1 Timothy 2 and those passages that speak of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, there is no Biblical passage that equates pastoral or teaching ministry with the exercise of authority; and, conversely, (2) most of the passages that do refer to exousia have nothing to do . . . with teaching or pastoral ministry.”

The “Pattern of Authority” outlined by Bernard Ramm remains the most biblically based authority paradigm. With slight adaptation, this is his model:

1. God alone is the ultimate authority: the triune God-head in total, eternal unity.
2. The Word is God’s delegated authority: his objective revelation written for us.
3. The Spirit is God’s regulator of authority: his subjective illumination in our minds. Ramm asserts that “it is in this duality that the Protestant and Christian principle of authority exists.” It follows that Jesus as Head of the duality that the Protestant and Christian principle of illumination in our minds. Ramm asserts that “it is in this revelation written for us.

New Testament teaching. The corrective truth needed in today’s church can be stated plainly but categorically: The New Testament word authority (exousia) in the context of Christ’s kingdom does not connote jurisdiction over others. Scripture forbids all kinds of personal dominance or rulership among God’s people (Matt. 20:25–28, 23:1–12; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:1–5, etc.). New Testament ecclesial governance is collegial rather than hierarchical, with the whole assembly involved (cf. Matt. 18:15–20; Acts 15; 1 Cor. 5:4, etc.). Authority in the church is nowhere prepackaged according to gender or status, nor is it conferred to any clergy person or church confederation, contrary to the ecclesiastical hierarchical structures built upon traditions of presumed authority.

Modern translations often amplify misinformation. For example, the NIV adds authority even when it is not in the Greek text (Heb. 13:17), and exhibits a penchant for non-inclusive masculine pronouns even when they are clearly meant to be gender-inclusive. Titus 2:15 in most translations is rendered, “Encourage and rebuke with all authority.” But the Greek word used here is not exousia but epitage, used in the Gospels as an injunction focusing on the “commands” of apostolic authority. Clearly, there is a crucial difference between a person (such as Titus) speaking with apostolic authority and someone speaking today with an assumed personal authority. Gordon Fee adds a small clarifying warning about this verse: “And ‘do this with all authority,’ which of course, is (Titus’s) by his relationship to Paul.”

Leadership responsibility in each house church was in the hands of several people, “those leading” (hoi proistomenoi, 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:3; 5:17; Rom. 12:8). But Paul’s letters were not addressed to these persons for them to carry out his directives themselves; responsibility lay in the whole church community. As in all of Paul’s letters, the so-called Pastoral Epistles are “occasional” (ad hoc) letters written in view of specific historical situations. Timothy and Titus are not model pastors Paul is helping to create a “church organization manual.” Rather, they are Paul’s reformational itinerants on temporary special assignment to correct error. Thus, they are not local pastoral models. Obviously no leader today can claim Pauline authority in his/her personal pastoral assignments.

Leadership is a function, not an office

Fourth, leadership among the people of God is always a relationship of function and is never attached to an authoritative office derived from personal position. “He appointed some to be pastors and teachers.” A single Greek article makes clear that “pastors and teachers” refers to one gifted person, and also makes explicit his/her twofold ministry of teaching and shepherding (Eph. 4:11–12). Paul’s paramount point is that Christ himself gives certain special gifts for leadership: “The gifts that he gave were that some would be pastors-teachers.” Christ gives persons as gifts so that several qualified leaders in every local church fellowship will support and facilitate “in preparing God’s people to serve in their ministry (diakonia), so that Christ’s body will be built up into maturity” (vv. 12–13). This primary principle of personification alerts us that there is no real distinction between the gift of teaching-leading and gifted teacher-leaders in the New Testament. Beyond this, everything is speculative. Nothing in the text suggests that “teaching pastors” possessed anything like the highly specialized formulation of a professional clergy office developed in modern Protestantism.
Thus, the first wave of a “patriarchal Christianity” against promise arose, blended with notions of masculine power. In this milieu, “charismatic” describes all who seriously embraced the doctrine of giftedness and ministered by the Spirit’s power. In this same time granted serving grace, which transforms itself into grace-gifts, or (charis). Some believers develop a mystical allegiance to the Church Fathers. Even so, aside from their strong creedal apologetics against Christological and Trinitarian heresies, there is no reason to suppose that the church of the Fathers was any less fallible than what continued throughout medieval times when, until the Reformation, Paul’s clear voice became nearly extinguished. Extraordinary caution should be taken when theologians practice “pan-liturgy,” the art of lifting from later second- to fourth-century traditions of Church Fathers and reading them backwards onto the New Testament as evangelical truth. Unfortunately, “retro-theologizing” is surprisingly pervasive even among evangelicals, but it is devoid of exegetical license.

I. Howard Marshall also warns that “It must be emphasized that . . . great caution should be exercised in reading back [from the Church Fathers, because] it is the pattern presented in the New Testament which must be decisive and not any hypothetical reconstruction based on later, extra-biblical sources. . . . The Church today should beware lest it loses the simplicity and directness of the New Testament pattern.”

“Appoint elders in every town . . . overseers” reflects Paul’s principle of plurality in local church leadership (Titus 1:5), clarifying the need for several women and/or men gifted as pastor-teachers in each local assembly. Note that every one of Paul’s letters was written to a local house church gathering. And in the NT references to “the church in the home,” all but one refer to women among the leaders. Modern scholarship has failed to grapple with the actual physical conditions and social contextualization of the New Testament house churches and how they functioned as households. Many Christians assume that New Testament churches were similar to our modern large-group churches, which gather in special buildings, and express amazement upon learning for the first time of the sociocultural shape and the dynamic household environment of the small-grouped New Testament house-church fellowships.16

It is easy to see that hierarchical authority constructs would have been out of place in these dynamically charismatic New Testament house churches, where members seriously embraced the doctrine of giftedness and ministered by the Spirit’s power. In this milieu, “charismatic” describes all who received Christ’s saving grace (charis). They are at the same time granted serving grace, which transforms itself into grace-gifts, or charismata. Scripturally, then, all believers together in every local church properly become a “charismatic community” (Eph. 4:7–8; 1 Peter 4:10; 1 Cor. 1:7; 7:7; 12:4, 31; 2 Cor. 1:11).

“Gifted, not “ordained.” It is conspicuous, then, that within this fervent New Testament environment, pastor-teachers did not consider themselves “ordained” to lead others but rather “gifted” to lead, embracing their gifted responsibility as one gift of the Spirit’s work among others (Eph. 4:11; Rom. 12:7–8; 1 Cor. 12:28–31). Every member was called and gifted for ministry, since “in the theocracy of grace there is no laity” (E. K. Simpson). The NT paradigm evidences a clear minimization of potential authoritarian overlordship and maximizes accountable servanthood. No clear distinction is made in elder-leader tasks since they held no “office” elevated to “the ministry” above others. Such notions, though distinctly unbecoming and masculine, soon emerged. The available information reveals a “very ill-lit tunnel” extending from the close of the New Testament apostolic era into the times of the Church Fathers. Their writings are more practical than scholarly, in which “one senses the immediate drop from the New Testament . . . [in] a period of intensified persecution and pernicious propaganda.”17

Not yet having the complete and written canonical New Testament (fourth c.), subbiblical shifts of theological compromise arose, blended with notions of masculine power. Thus, the first wave of a “patriarchal Christianity” against women was set off, expressed by some Fathers in androcentric and misogynistic language such that their words bear no resemblance to nor origin from the God of the Scriptures.

In this second-century environment among Clement, Ignatius, and Ireneaus, a hardening in the understanding of grace and gifts set off a rift-shift between the “laity” and an emerging “clergy” class. Fussy liturgical embellishments of bishopric control were instigated so that by the mid-third century the “sacerdotalizing of ministry in Cyprian” solidified into an autocratic high priestly office, which was further set apart by the ritual of ordination. Out of this androcentric morass “Holy Traditions” were concretized, and they provided Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy an illegitimate base for their churches’ hierarchy and “tradition” to gain authority, even over Scripture itself.18 Later still, “office” terminology gained Protestant popularity when English hierarchs inserted the word itself into the text of the King James Version (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1, 13; Rom. 11:13; 12:4).
convinced,” reflecting the Greek middle voice, wherein the (peitho) is more literally to “let yourselves be persuaded or charge of the work of others” (TLB).

“the man with authority” (Phillips), and “put you in remaining: “Should men be ordained?”22

“Should women be ordained?” since the critical question be consistently balanced with the scriptural reality of rank are wholly absent. Our leadership terminology must be consistently balanced with the scriptural reality of every-member giftedness and the “ministryhood of all believers.” In the end, therefore, the real issue isn’t “Should women be ordained?” since the critical question remains: “Should men be ordained?”22

In stark contrast to the manipulated church the Fathers inaugurated, the New Testament remains unencumbered of hierarchy, portraying leadership as servants ministering in an organismic body, not administering an organizational institution (Eph. 4:1–16; 1 Cor. 12, 14). Nor are church leaders ever called “rulers” (archontes), because elder leadership concerns relational-functional serving rather than positional-institutional ruling. Accordingly, the word manage (proistemi) in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 carries the idea of managerial and supervisory care from spiritual maturity, wisdom, and counsel.

Leadership is a function. An example of the humble and nontechnical sense of NT leadership stands out in Paul’s list of gifts where he nestled the word indicating “leadership ability” (proistemi) between “contributing to the needs of others” and “showing mercy” (Rom. 12:8). Even more dramatic, Paul used the Greek participle form “the one leading” to highlight the fact that leadership is a functioning ministry of giftedness rather than a static “office” of positional power. The term is also connected to how elders function in 1 Timothy 5:17. In contradiction to these facts, hierarchical translators write into texts such as Romans 12:8 extrabiblical ideas of male authority: “officials” (β), “the man with authority” (Phillips), and “put you in charge of the work of others” (TLB).

At a glance, Hebrews 13:17 appears to contradict these facts: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (NIV). But authority is an interpolation since exousia is not in the Greek text. It is correctly omitted in newer translations such as the NRSV and NLT, and in older translations such as the NASB and even KJV. Moreover, the word translated obey (peitho) is more literally to “let yourselves be persuaded or convinced,” reflecting the Greek middle voice, wherein the subject is a participant in the results of the action. The implication is to “let yourselves” (do such and such), conveying an attitude of “being open to the persuasion” of your leaders.23 Even the single word submit (hupeiko) is rare and used in the NT only here. Although expanded into the English phrase “submit to their authority,” exousia, as already noted, is not in the verse. Hupeiko in classical Greek was used to describe soft and yielding substances,24 reflecting a softening tone of being “disposed to yielding” or “participatory yielding.”

Teaching pastors, having responsibility for the teaching of the Word, have no inherent authority from or over the Word they teach; their leadership is under the Word (cf. 1, 2 Timothy and Titus for the exhortations and instructions on how to handle the Word rightly). Therefore, when controlled by the Spirit, pastoral leaders serve others with gifts of teaching and edification, building up brothers and sisters by enabling them to grow into maturity for living out God’s will rather than the will of authoritarian leaders (cf. Eph. 4:12–16). Good pastoral and spiritual leadership occurs, therefore, when the people of God, using their spiritual wisdom, insight, and discernment, yield an opinion in deference to Spirit-guided pastoral persuasion in the exposition of biblical truth.

This kind of servant leadership evokes corresponding respect and appreciation from those served. And so, the word for admonish (noutheteiri) in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 is an appeal to the nous, the faculty of intelligent judgment and understanding. The tone of the word suggests an appeal in love, not the deliverance of an authoritative edict. Instead of a chain of command there is a choice of commitment among peers. In the context of mutual submission in Christ’s body, servant leadership knows there is no spiritual merit in submitting to authority involving the dimensions of power and coercion.

Christians and non-Christians obey out of necessity all the time in political empires, in military corps, even in business corporations. Jesus the Lord, on the other hand, esteems a submission that is unenforced and flows from a servant attitude (cf. Gal. 5, 13; Phil. 2:3–5), demonstrating that “the only authority to which we need appeal in the body of Christ is the authority of Scripture and the law of love.”25

Paul’s authority cannot be transferred

Fifth, Paul’s authority as a missionary church founder resides in his apostleship and is therefore nontransferable. Since all claims of transferable apostolic authority are fallacious, we cannot claim apostolic principles of leadership for ourselves directly. Leadership according to the Pauline style is a matter of modeling, both in character and communication (1 Tim. 4:11–14). Paul’s principles of leading delineated in 2 Corinthians 10–13 reveal a servant-leader reflecting Christlikeness among, not over, God’s people. By deliberate refusal of coercion, Paul communicates confidence in
his followers. He is sure Christ will transform them, and so he preserves their freedom. Though reluctant to confront with apostolic authority, when necessary he does so forcefully with Scripture’s authority.

**All authority belongs to Christ**

*Sixth, Christ’s body the church has only one Head, the Lord Jesus himself.* “He is the head of the church . . . so in everything he might have the supremacy. . . . God has put all things under the authority of Christ, and he gave him this authority for the benefit of the church (Eph. 1:20–23; Col. 1:15–18, NLT, NIV). Headship in human relations does not connote authority over another, and it is never introduced into the NT context of church leadership. Authentic servant leaders serve Jesus the Head among the people, not over them. So critical is this reality that we’re admonished even to shun fallen hierarchical terminology such as “father” for spiritual leaders (Matt. 23:9). In fact, hierarchical titles contradict the reality of the priesthood of all believers corporately and the Spirit’s giftedness to every Christian.

**Freedom to serve others.** In summary, the fallen “Gentile” leadership model with its right to rule others in this-world cultures is replaced by the New Testament Christian leadership pattern with its freedom to serve others in countercultural communities of mutual submission. The biblical model of servant leadership avoids the pitfalls either of the restoration of hierarchical structures on the one hand, or an audacious individualism on the other.

“The temptation to control people is often Christianized by spiritual strong men who present a benign persona.” A Christianity Today editorial written two decades ago, “Of Shepherds, Fiefs, and the Flock,” warned of the phenominal rise and rifts of the seventies’ “spiritual authority” shepherding movement, as well as about Christians and organizations with an authority agenda. It remains a reminder that no man or woman can be ultimately trusted with authority, and it warns of lessons not learned from the past. Still, complementarians are caught up in the exact temptation to control by spiritual strong men who present a benign persona. The hierarchicalist devotion to authoritarian leadership is in reality post-Christian when judged by the scriptural data.

A surprising thing about the New Testament concerning leadership is its lack of interest in it!

Notwithstanding, their authority thesis remains merely a “Christianized” restatement of fallen and sexually dominant patriarchal regimes of the world’s systems. To be clear: authority (extrinsic right or permission) and power (intrinsic ability to act) are basic to all civil governance (Rom. 13:1–7), military “chain-of-command” corps (Matt. 8:5–9), and are the underpinnings of most secular organizations. But the truism that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” remains part and parcel of all human authority/power structures, the effects seen everywhere on those who labor within these environments. The world’s authority strategems stand in stark opposition to the kingdom of heaven.

The hierarchicalists’ authority thesis remains an oxymoronic gospel of male power, founded on a negative presupposition of male hierarchy. Ultimately, the promise of unfreedom is impossible to prove. On the contrary, Jesus’ gospel is redemptive liberation, and so Paul’s theological core is the doctrine of freedom. Withstanding all hierarchical opposition, Paul’s Galatians 3:28 manifesto against gender discrimination between “male and female” will remain permanent. For sure, God’s Word is not “Yes” for the male half of the church and “No” for the other half (cf. 2 Cor. 1:18–20). On the contrary, the text explodes with the Lord’s “Yes” to all women and men equally.

The burden of proof will remain on complementarians to justify their authority thesis of male power from Scripture alone, rather than by a circuitous “role theology.” Ambivalently, one of their own acknowledged this, averring that “It [is] evident that the burden of proof regarding the exclusion of women from the office of teaching and ruling within the congregation now lies on those who maintain the exclusion rather than on those who challenge it.”

Complementarians *can see* the light and admit they were wrong. Onetime hierarchicalist professor Ronald Pierce tells how he “experienced . . . a significant change of mind” about the role issue. He notes that many scholars had given up on serious dialogue over the basic question of gender roles. Nevertheless, he came to realize that the historic maltreatment by Christians of Jews, blacks, and women (the same people groups of Gal. 3:28) resulted from the church’s blind prejudices, biases, and gender-role fixation that affected textual reading for two millennia. “Yes,” he writes, “it is possible that we have been wrong all this time.” He came to conclude that “after seventy-five or so generations of church history it is long past time to admit that we were wrong.”

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Endnotes

5. Grenz, 209.
6. John Stott says the most misunderstood verse in the Bible is John 16:13. Misleading translations (καὶ ἀλλαὶ ἀλήθεια) give a false promise many have disastrously claimed. The Greek reads “καὶ ἀλλαὶ ἀλήθεια,” and our New Testament is permanent evidence that the apostles were guided into all the truth of what Jesus did and said to fulfill the canon of Scripture (Understanding the Bible, Zondervan, 1976), 197.
7. Bengt Holmberg, Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Building on Weber’s typology (chap. 5), Holmberg detects an “authority structure” and “implicit hierarchy” in the Primitive Church, as institutionalization, that is, “the development of offices” fostered a “legitimate domination” of power (6, 192).
8. Walter L. Liefeld, “Women and the Nature of Ministry,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 30/1 (March 1987), 49–61. See also his authority typology based on observations in evangelical churches de jure (assigned authority), de facto (accrued authority), and de senso (perceived authority), 63.
19. In his otherwise excellent egalitarian treatise Women in the Church, Stanley Grenz parts from commonly held egalitarian principles on authority, opting for an enigmatic hierarchicalism of “clerical authority.” Grenz affirms that exercising hierarchical power over others is unbiblical (“it sets aside our Lord’s teaching,” and “hierarchical forms [do not] reflect God’s original intent”). At the same time he says that “the use of power can be a legitimate component of true leadership (156, 216, 225). This idea is based on a more critically adverse hypothesis, that “from the New Testament perspective, we can speak of the authority inherent in the ordained office, an authority that confers the right to exercise power” (228). Thus Grenz is convinced that it’s the “derived nature of clerical authority” that provides power specifically to those who are in “the ordained office,” even while agreeing that its practice “goes beyond what may have been envisioned in the biblical era” (229, 193).