

The Dreaded S-Word: Submission and the Abuse of Authority



by ROBYN HUCK

Fear lives at the Sullivans' house.

It's not evident 24/7, but fear awakens every evening at 6:30 when daddy is expected home. That's when eight-year-old Jenna knows it's time to go on high alert. And the five-year-old twins know it, too. There will be *something* wrong. There always is.

Brad Sullivan gets off from work at 4:00 and stops "to unwind" before coming home. He smells like beer as he opens the door with an angry shout. "Martha! There are toys blocking the door! Get the kids down here to pick them up—now. This place is a pit, as usual. Do you do *anything* during the day?"

We first met Martha in the introduction to this three part series on the biblical doctrine of submission. The intention of this series has been to identify common misconceptions about submission, to show biblical examples of godly submission, and to better understand its importance and value in our lives today.¹ In this last segment, we're asking a very tough question: What does godly submission look like when sin has overtaken the relationship?

¹ Robyn Huck, "The Dreaded S-Word: Submission and Our Proud Hearts," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 29:3 (2015): 21–35, and Huck, "Submission and the Active Role of Helper," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30:1(2016): 34–51.

Here is Martha's story from part one:

Crying at the sink, Martha hears what's going on in the next room. Her husband is in a rage. Once again, he is cursing at the children and she can hear him slapping them. She continues working in the kitchen because he ordered her to "wash the dishes and mind your own business."

Martha complies with Brad's demands because she thinks she has to. She's laboring under an unbiblical concept of submission and as a result, she and her children are suffering. What is unbiblical about what she believes? What does Scripture actually say about submission? And what does it say to Martha and her church and others who care for her? It says there is something very wrong here. This is not how submission is supposed to be.²

What constitutes a misuse of authority? Where should those under harmful authority turn for help? And under what circumstances should authorities be disobeyed?

In this final segment of the Dreaded S-Word series, we'll look at scriptural precepts that address situations in which authority figures have lost sight of the responsibility God has given them and have harmed those in their care. The Sullivans will be our case study, but family and marriage will not be our only focus. What follows is relevant to every situation that involves people in authority (called *leaders* or *heads*) and people who are under their authority (called *followers* or *helpers*³). We'll address these questions: What constitutes a misuse of authority? Where should those under harmful authority turn for help? And under what circumstances should authorities be disobeyed? I will propose a decision-making sequence for

² In this series we are focused on the subject of submission. As such, we'll look at Martha's position and responsibilities. How to address Brad's behavior is beyond what we can cover here.

³ In part 1 of the series, I made the argument for using the title *helper* from the Hebrew word *ezer* (Gen 2:18).

those who have been harmed and are wondering what to do, along with those who are trying to counsel or assist them.

This is a call to action—not just to followers like Martha, but to all the advocates and allies that should be looking out for her, including her church and community. We must step up to the responsibility we’ve been given: to submit to God by fulfilling the command to care for each other.

To start, we must consider the structure God has established for relationships. Every one of our relationships is for God’s purposes, and he has defined them for us. By turning first to God’s Word, we reduce the likelihood of defining relationships from our own experiences (what we grew up with) or desires (what we wish to be true). Either of those could pull us away from understanding God’s purpose for the authority in these relationships.

God’s Purpose for Authority in Relationships

We will consider the scriptural premises for five areas of authority ordained by God. You’ll see that there’s a common theme: all authority has the responsibility to protect and provide for those in its care. You’ll also see that each of the authority roles described in Scripture is modeled by God as he is king, shepherd, master, father, and bridegroom to us.

1. *Civil government* is established by God to maintain order. It is to punish evildoers and recognize those who do right, to thwart rebellion, and to defend the state (Gen 9:5–7; Rom 13:1–4; 1 Peter 2:13–14). Civil government includes all positions within local, state, and federal government and law enforcement. Governments are established as a reflection of God as a loving king and all humanity as his rightful subjects.

2. *Church leadership* is established by God to equip believers to do good works, and to help them become mature in Christ. They’re to teach the Word of God, shepherd the flock, and live as humble examples. They are to discern right from wrong, and restore those who have transgressed, if possible. Church leadership includes the positions of preacher, teacher, elder, and deacon.⁴ Those in church leadership are considered shepherds within individual

⁴ The Bible’s description of church leadership includes more detailed instruction than any other category, much more than this summary contains. Please see 2 Timothy 4:1–2; 1 Peter 5:1–7; Matthew 16:18–19; Matthew 18:15–17; Mark 3:14–15 and Luke 9:1–2; Matthew 28:19–20; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 13:17.

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