



Bowing to Authority

Ps 25:1-9; Ezek 18:1-4, 25-32; Mat 21:23-32; Phil 2:1-13

Submission is overrated and passé, anymore. We are much more concerned with rights, position, assertiveness, and making our own paths. After all, we exist not to serve, but to be served, don't we? It is our birthright as Americans that we be free, independent, and seemingly responsible to no one. Or maybe it is that attitude that has brought us to our current national crisis. Refusing to bow to any sense of earthly authority, we tend also to refuse God's design for our lives. Is bowing to God's authority really all that onerous, or are we just afraid to allow God sway in our lives?

The proverb Ezekiel cited was very well known. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's mouths have been turned on edge." It was a way of referring to the past catching up with us, though more often than not rather late. It was also a way to say that the problems we face are not of our doing. We have just inherited the problems of those who have gone before. We are not the ones who messed things up, it was our ancestors. Now we just have to reap the consequences.

Interestingly enough, the Jews were still using this proverb in Jesus' day, asking whose fault it was when a man was born blind, his own, or his parents. Ezekiel had answered that this was not the way of God, but the people were still grappling with the issue. If this is not how God operates, then why do we suffer for things that are not of our own doing? Why do we still struggle with the consequences of what previous generations have done with the world around us?

Are we really interested in finding God and God's will for our lives? Aren't we more concerned with communicating our will to God and somehow manipulating God to follow our own will and plan? We want God to correct the crises we face personally, but we don't really want to be involved in God's solution to the crises faced by others. Like little children, we still see ourselves as the center of the universe, even while we give lip-service the reality that we are not. While God calls us beyond our self-centered constraints, we have trouble understanding the world beyond our immediate context and personal concerns.

The Jewish religious leaders were very concerned about issues of authority in regard to Jesus' actions. After all, Jesus was messing with the status quo, renouncing some of the accepted form and norms of religious life. Jesus was countering the established religious patterns of worship. The very foundation of Jewish religious life was at stake in their perspective. Questioning the authority behind his claims was a very natural step, given what was at stake. How could Jesus claim to speak for God, when his message countered their established patterns of following God's instruction in the Mosaic Biblical tradition?

Once the question was out, however, Jesus turned it back to them. At that point, they began looking at the political implications of any response they might give. In accepting their quandary in desire to maintain standing in the eyes of the people, Jesus took them one step further. It is not our overt statements about serving God that truly matter. What is really important is the character of our actions that give feet to our words.

This is why Paul focused on the example of Christ Jesus. Life was not going Paul's way, at least not in accord with our definitions and perspective. Paul was in prison. Paul had been falsely accused.

There were those preaching Christ Jesus just to make Paul's life all the more miserable. The Jews were against him. Among them were those who accepted Christ, but only as an addition to all the legalism of rabbinic tradition. He was embroiled in a culture war by those who would not allow tradition to change in light of the proclamation of God's grace through Christ Jesus. Paul had suffered for his faith, being beaten, whipped, stoned, and left for dead. In the life and example of Christ Jesus, however, all this took on a new perspective.

Paul's concern was not the crises he faced, but rather how Jesus dealt with the crises of life. Jesus was questioned as to the authority for his teaching and pointed the questioners to his actions. When called to account for his own actions, he likewise called others to self-evaluation. When called to those in grief, pain, suffering, despair, he offered solace, comfort, love, and hope. When called upon to serve God, he claimed no right to live above discomfort, fatigue, pain, suffering, or death.

As the believers in Philippi suffered, he called on them to look to the example of Jesus Christ for comfort, encouragement, hope, compassion, and sympathy to share with one another. It is in the living example of the incarnation of Jesus Christ that God's will and character is ultimately displayed. It is in this example that we find the way we are likewise to live.

Paul quotes the hymn that reminded all that while Christ Jesus was fully God, with all divine right and privilege, it was not according to privilege he chose to live. Rather than grasping to rights and power, God lay aside position to become a servant alongside us—a human being in our own position as servants of Almighty God. As a servant, Jesus did just what servants are supposed to do: He became obedient. He bowed to God's authority, will, position, and status, accepting his new status as a servant.

His service was without limit. He did not serve as long as it was comfortable, safe, secure, or pleasant. Rather, obedient submission took over his life, leading him even unto death on a cross. Jesus is then the ultimate example of a godly servant. He is the model of all, not that he had power over death, hell, and evil. He is the model and our example because of his choice and action—to serve God with his all, even to the point of death.

That is just not the way we like stories to read. We want happy endings—endings that please our sense of how life ought to work out. We like to think that there is that kind of ending here, as Paul does state that at Jesus' name every knee will bow, but then we ignore the fact that two of those knees are our own. To follow Christ Jesus is to accept not only the superiority of his character and person, but also to accept the quality of his living service in submission to God's will.

Rather than looking at our crises, Paul says we are to look to our Lord. Rather than follow our own will and desire, we are to bow our lives before the Christ of the cross in like submission to the only authority that really matters. Within our struggles, we find in Jesus that life is more than our preferred issues of comfort, abundance, prosperity, and pleasure. There is a greater purpose for our living. It is to bow as Christ Jesus in submission to God's authority.

Our concern should be no longer about who ate the sour grapes. The concern is whether we will recognize God as the author and sustainer of life, bowing to God's authority rather than some sense of an authority of our own. Jesus never submitted his will to ours. He challenged us to submit ours, instead. Maybe submission and bowing should be a little more than *passé*—it is the way of Christ Jesus.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*