

What is Biblical Submission?

By Bob Young

“You must submit to me,” said the elder.

“Why?” asked the member.

“Because I am over you and you are under me.” Or, “You must submit to me because you are my disciple.”

The U.S. “shepherding movement” in the 1970s practiced forced “discipleship” submission and hurt a lot of people in the process. Leaders of this movement eventually repented of their errors and shifted the focus. In churches of Christ, the “Boston Movement” (now International Church of Christ, ICOC) was influenced by the “prevailing winds” of the time and applied some of the same principles. The cell church movement witnessed a resurgence of this erroneous submission mentality in the 1990s through the G12 model.

We Christians are not called to make our own disciples; we are to make disciples of Christ. Jesus never asked us to get people to obey us as part of the discipleship process. We are called to be and to make obedient followers of Jesus.

Jesus spoke against forced submission when he said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matt. 20:25). Adding to the power of his words, in the Upper Room Jesus “...got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:4).

When one demands that someone submit, something is wrong with the model, or something is wrong with the understanding of biblical submission. When church leaders print name cards telling people they are apostles, most likely they are not. In other words, submission is a response to an unspoken reality. That explains why, after telling wives to submit to their husbands, Paul told husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). Paul begins the narrative by telling both husbands and wives to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).

I believe in submission! Submission is biblical and mutual. Biblical submission is practiced in a loving way. The writer of Hebrew says, “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” (Heb. 13:17). Every believer needs to part of a local church and submissive to leadership.

What does submission look like? How do churches instill a spirit of submission?

- Establish and follow the biblical principles for submission. Submission is a natural part of human relationships, when sacrificial servants are leading the way.
- Build submission into the church culture. Make certain that the “upside down” model of leadership is demonstrated constantly.
- Learn submission together as a church. Servanthood is a key. Biblical submission is mutual. Study and apply biblical guidelines.
- Submission is not for the few. Every Christian has the responsibility to submit. Submission must be taught and practiced as a spiritual discipline and part of the Christian walk.