

---

# An Overlooked Help: Church Discipline and the Protection of Women

**Jeremy Pierre**

*Assistant Professor of Biblical Counseling  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Louisville, Kentucky*

---

Church discipline and complementarianism—having either one of these items on your church’s statement of faith will pretty much guarantee someone will label you authoritarian, but having both will make you seem downright medieval. If you mention either doctrine to people on the street, they may conclude you are part of a cult that monitored its members and allowed men to dominate their wives. Both church discipline and complementarianism are tender subjects because they highlight *authority* in particularly unsubtle ways, ways that make it easy for the mind to jump to its abuses. And to be fair, we have seen all too clearly the way authority can be so easily abused. History is rife with examples of it; contemporary fiction shows our great sensitivity to it; and many of us have experienced it directly. So this makes us nervous about any situation in which one person or group has the right to direct another person or group. Our impulse is to prefer what we think of as personal freedom.

But if we understand godly authority as the responsibility to direct those under it through self-emptying service, then we will practice church discipline in such a way that protects women from the abuse of ungodly authority. The godly authority of church leadership should, by powerful contrast, crush any ungodly authority by men in the church. No abuser will be comfortable in the kind of church that exercises godly authority.

I would like to contrast these two opposing versions of authority in order to demonstrate how

consistent complementarianism and church discipline work together for the protection of women, children, and anyone who may be placed under ungodly authority in the church.

## **The Ungodly Authority of Men**

“I’m not sure I want you to rake our leaves. It might make my son mad.”

I was in our church’s neighborhood, standing on the front porch of an elderly woman. A group of us was walking the streets with our leaf bags and old rakes, knocking on doors. I respectfully told the elderly woman I didn’t understand what she meant.

“Shh. He might hear you,” she said with a tenuous glance over her shoulder. “Oh, alright. I think it’ll save him an afternoon of work.” So we got busy raking and bagging.

I was bent over stuffing a bag when I heard a human explosion. “What do you think you’re doing?” I turned to see on the porch a lumbering middle aged man, wearing sweats and a very red face. Before I could answer, the man was cruising on a 70 mph tirade about property rights, his personal plans to rake that afternoon, and other loosely related topics. But then the conversation got a bit more personal. He asked who we were.

“Aren’t you that church up the road that hates women?” I thought about responding with some counter-ridiculousness, “Well, not officially.” But he continued too quickly, “Get your authoritarian garbage out of our neighborhood. No one wants you here. Now get out.” All the while, the mother

was behind him, halfway behind the door, wringing her hands with her head down. After trying unsuccessfully to gain a hearing, I asked his pardon and kept our group going down the street. The two of them receded into the front room, his yelling still audible from the street.

For all this man's blustering about how women should have equal authority to men, if that episode was indicative of how that household ran, our church would have disciplined this man. The functional authority of that home was that man's angry passion, and it showed in his mother's fear of him. This display is the exact opposite of the servant-hearted authority of Jesus, the kind of authority he demands his followers imitate. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:25–28).

When a man's authority is not derived from God's self-emptying authority, it is always twisted into something satanic. Men will use their physical strength to intimidate or outright assault women and children. They will manipulate by withholding affection or provision to get what they want out of those under their care. No matter how sinister what they're wanting is, their warped sense of entitlement justifies it. They use their authority not to serve, but to be served in sick ways—from sexual abuse and battery to more subtle cruelty, like creating a caustic and unpredictable home in which wives and children live in constant fear and apprehension.

God hates this mockery of his authority, where men are given authority for the purpose of giving of themselves for those under their care but instead use it to please themselves. Of the leaders of Israel in Ezekiel's day, God railed "Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.... Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will

require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:2–3, 10). In speaking to the leaders of ancient Israel, the Lord displays his timeless view of how human authority should work: to reflect his servant-hearted grace. Any other kind of authority he is *against*.

Pastors who claim to be shepherding their church in ways pleasing to the Lord must be equally against such wickedness. Conservative evangelical churches must be willing to take the responsibility for disciplining unrepentant members for sins that might be easier to overlook. We are more aware of the fact that we cannot overlook a man abandoning his spouse for another lover, a woman leaving her family for a lifestyle of addiction, or a person denying the deity of Jesus Christ. But are we as aware that to overlook ungodly authority being exercised in our church is just as heinous to God?

Sadly, such ungodly authority occurs all the time in the homes of men who sit with their families in the front section and catechize their children as well as in the homes of those marginal folks whose names are on the roll of the church but their faces are rarely seen. Godly church leadership will not tolerate such ungodly authority in either one.

### **The Godly Authority of Church Leadership**

This Ezekiel passage continues with the promise of a second David who would come as the good Shepherd, who would exercise his authority for the good of those under his care: "I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken" (Ezek 34:22–24). Jesus is the paradigm of godly authority—one that feeds and protects the sheep from what threatens them, including sickness (v. 4), their own wandering hearts (v. 4), wild beasts (vv. 5, 8), and even false

shepherds (vv. 18–19). Jesus stood up against each at great personal cost to himself.

And church leadership must imitate such authority. Jesus gave of his authority to the church to guard his gospel (Matt 16:17–18) and his people (Heb 13:17) by putting out those who are mere pretenders (Matt 18:16–17) so as not to harm others through their corruption (1 Cor 5:9–13). This is church discipline. And it is a tool to be wielded for the protection of the helpless, like a shepherd’s rod. I would like to propose three practical ways by which godly authority can wield the rod of church discipline against ungodly authority.

First, church leadership should promote a culture of safety for oppressed people in the congregation by being pastorally engaged and available. This must begin with the general awareness that ungodly authority is more prevalent than we’d like to think. Hopefully, the majority of Christian husbands are imperfectly struggling to imitate Jesus and will only need the regular help of seeing how servant-hearted authority translates into directing his home. But others will be hardened ogres at home, even if they are nice guys publicly. Unless God brings an unusual season of conviction for sin, they will not be the ones to seek a pastor out. This is why wives, and even children, should be encouraged to seek safety under godly authority.

I can think of at least two ways to do this: (1) In keeping with a culture of discipleship that acknowledges the need for one another to have victory over personal sin (Heb 3:12–13), wives should be reminded that by remaining quiet about abusive husbands they insulate them from the loving correction they need to save their souls from destruction. It is not loving to hide domestic abuse; it will only bring destruction. To the victim as well as the perpetrator. No matter how many times an abuser feels guilty and promises not to continue, without help from others, the pattern will continue. (2) Wives and children should then be given avenues of contact with pastors who will care for them. While the pastor should not promise absolute confidentiality, he should nevertheless promise to be a guiding presence through whatever consequences will come from exposing the abuse. People generally

know the avenues of contacting leadership—email, phone numbers, etc.—but in publicly framing those avenues as safe means of reaching out on this particular issue, you increase the likelihood of an abused woman or child following through.

Second, church leadership should exercise authority by unyielding accountability. In the case of violence or sexual abuse, this must involve governing authorities. Many well-meaning pastors may, in the attempt to show grace, treat violence as “church family business.” This is both illegal and foolish. Part of godly authority is exacting the consequences of a man’s actions on him. An abuser must be accountable to the law, regardless of the state of his repentance.

This will mean some hard conversations for the pastor. With the wife, the pastor will have to comfort her as she dreads the fallout she will undoubtedly face in her lifestyle, in her marital relationship, and with the children. This is hard enough. But the real test of a shepherd’s resolve will be with the husband. The pastor will often have to be the one who explains how the abuse came to the light, why it was right to do so, and what the consequences will be. These consequences include reporting to the authorities and, in many cases, removing the wife and children from the home and placing them with a family from the church temporarily. The pastor should make clear to the man that safety is not found in hiding such behavior, but exposing it. The pastor should also unapologetically state to the abuser that not only will he report the current situation, he will cooperate fully with any investigation of the crime.

In regard to church discipline, the public nature of the crime makes it a matter of public address before the congregation. What form this address takes is largely dependent on the disposition of this man toward his sin. If he is angry at being exposed and is threatening toward those under his thumb, the man should be brought before the congregation for excommunication. Godly authority cannot allow a man to claim Christ and behave like Satan toward his family. If, on the other hand, he is broken and repentant, then the congregation can be briefed on it as a matter of pastoral care, so that

they can forgive, pray, and seek the family with practical help.

In the case of non-criminal physical intimidation or emotional bullying, the public authorities do not get involved. But church authorities must. Often, families corrode away for years under harsh and dissatisfied men who use outbursts of anger, verbal threats, and abusive talk to manipulate those under their care. Pastors should confront such sin with no less resolve. In fact, this type of abuse is often more difficult to awaken a man to, since it falls under the legal alarms. But church leaders must insist that such a self-centered and manipulative lifestyle is indicative of a heart that does not know the grace of Christ (Eph 4:31–32). The same steps of church discipline would apply here—confrontation that, if not met with repentance, leads to public discipline. If it is met with repentance, then the matter does not need to be reported publicly, but rather privately with a team of men and women who will maintain vigilant accountability over the home.

In either case, whether outright abuse or corrosive intimidation, godly authority demands that church leaders protect and love those under their care. God often uses this very thing to display to oppressed people what true authority looks like. Pastors and church leaders have the privilege of displaying the kind of leadership that both directs and serves people for their protection.

And, for what it's worth, it demonstrates that complementarians, in all their talk about self-sacrificial authority, are trying to be consistent. Tackling such a problem, not to mention leading a congregation faithfully through it, is no easy thing. There is a lot of risk and personal cost involved. Pastors will face sleepless nights, angry threats, full guestrooms, phone calls to authorities, questioned motives, and unnerving conversations in the practice of church discipline on this matter. And by doing so, they get to display that puzzling authority of Jesus, who served those under his command.