

## Authority in the Church II Corinthians 10

What do you think is important in a pastor? Well, according to verse 10, the Apostle Paul didn't live up to whatever standards the folks had in Corinth. Yes, as he reminds them in verse 14, he had been the first one to preach Christ to them some three or four years earlier, and he had stayed with them for about a year and a half – a really long time for such a footloose evangelist. But instead of being grateful for the ministry of a true apostle of God in their midst, the Corinthians apparently thought they deserved a whole lot more than Paul had to offer.

For one thing, they didn't think Paul's personal appearance was impressive enough – I guess he didn't have the ancient equivalent of perfectly swept-back hair and gleaming capped teeth. And, enamored as the Ancient Greeks were of grand oratory, they didn't think Paul's sermons were sufficiently polished. As citizens of a wealthy, cosmopolitan center of international trade, they wanted a preacher they could be proud of, and a wandering rabbi from Tarsus didn't seem to fill the bill.

So, what do you think is important in a pastor? Given your last two pastors, I think it's safe to say this congregation isn't as hung up on a particular pastoral image as the Corinthians seemed to be. I mean, Mr. Daniels had to shop in the Big and Tall stores, and I can find things that fit just fine in the boy's department. And from what I can remember, neither one of us would give Billy Graham any challenge in a fiery pulpit orators' competition. At least when I heard him, Mr. Daniels was pretty low-key, and too many years of writing debate briefs and teaching high school students has given me a tendency get right to the point, without any poems or stories. No, unlike the Ancient Greeks, who loved good-looking, well-trained orators, this congregation doesn't seem to have a fixed idea about how their preachers should look or sound.

But that doesn't mean we modern Americans would be any more comfortable with Paul's ministry than were the Ancient Corinthians, although perhaps for different reasons. For while they wanted Paul to be as forceful and awe-inspiring in person as he was in his letters, we have no interest in our pastors and ruling elders being so overbearing. Instead, when we independent-minded Presbyterians hear Paul talking about punishing disobedience in verse 6 and boasting about his authority in verse 8, we'd just as soon turn the page.

But whether we like it or not, we can't deny that God does in fact appoint leaders for His Church. After all, Paul makes it clear that God gave him some sort of rule, some sort of jurisdiction over Corinth in verse 13. And in verse 16, he indicates that his area of rule, his sphere of operations would be enlarged to other regions. And almost 2000 years later, we still elect ruling and teaching elders to perform these same sorts of functions.

Okay, so what is it that God wants these leaders of His Church to do? And what characteristics should they have in order to do their jobs well?

To start with, let's take another look at verse 8, where Paul mentions his authority. Why does he say God gave that authority to him? For edification, not destruction – to build up the people, not to tear them down.

That was an important thing for the Corinthians to remember, as they seemed to have disdained Paul's humble, meek style of ministry. Oh, they may have wanted impassioned pulpit oratory, and they may even have wanted a pastor to tell everyone what to do, but it's all too easy for this sort of strong leadership to devolve into simple bullying. And we've seen too many examples of congregations that have been split apart by my-way-or-the-highway preachers.

But as we have learned over the last few weeks, God isn't interested in people devoting time or money to His Kingdom work either out of a sense of guilt or fear. Instead, God wants His people to obey Him from the heart in all areas of our lives, not because we've been browbeaten by an impressive orator or a pushy pastor.

But if that's true, it's also the case that sometimes we need to hear uncomfortable truths from God's Word. Because sin is so deceptive, and because it's so easy for us to rationalize our way into thinking or feeling or doing almost anything, sometimes we need someone to shoot straight with us, to cut through the cultural confusion all around us, to shine the light of God's truth into our lives so that we might come into greater conformity with it. And aren't we all much more receptive to hearing such uncomfortable truths from people who are humble and gentle, from those we know love us so much?

And that brings us to the second thing all good leaders should do – for if they should lead in humble meekness, they should also base all their actions and decisions on the Word of God. Look at how Paul describes his ministry in verses 4 and 5 – he says it is his responsibility to stand firm against idle speculations on the one hand and proud and lofty assertions on the other. He must confront these flights of imagination not with polished oratory, but with the simple knowledge of God alone. In this way he sought to bring every one of his own thoughts – and naturally those of his readers and listeners as well – into captivity to Christ, into obedience to Christ.

And this continues to be a principal responsibility of all church leaders today. For if we are to exercise the authority God has given us for the upbuilding of the people, we must never depend on our own imagination, our own experience, or our own reason to teach us right from wrong. We must not urge people to think or act in a certain way just because that's the way we've always done it, or because it's socially acceptable. No, we must urge our people to obey Christ alone, and that means submitting all our understanding to the Word of God alone.

Well, so far, so good. I think it's safe to say that all of us want church leaders who try to build us up, not bully us into submission. And I hope we are just as interested in our pastors, Sunday School teachers and Ruling Elders making sure that everything they tell us is completely in accordance with God's Word. But if we want all of that to be true of our leaders, there's one more thing we need to know about authority within the Church – and that is the people's responsibility for obedience.

“Now, hold on just a minute – you done stopped preachin' and gone to meddlin'! Since when do American Presbyterians have to obey anyone? We don't have a bunch of pointy-hatted bishops telling us what to do, and we sure don't want any, either! So, what's all this talk about obedience?”

Alright, calm down. Let's think again about what Paul's been telling us. Let's assume for the sake of argument that you do in fact have a pastor and ruling elders who really do love you and want to build you up with the truth of God's Word. And let's also assume that your church leaders know the Scriptures, and that everything they are telling you is only what they have found in God's Word. After

all, you have the right to elect those kinds of leaders for yourselves, so if they aren't loving and wise, you can always vote them out, right?

Okay, so if all that's true, and if one of these loving and wise elders were to come to you, showing you something in your life that was obviously not in accordance with the Word of God – well, what should you do? And if you were to listen to that caring, knowledgeable church leader and if you were to decide you needed to make a change in your life because of what he or she told you, well, you really wouldn't be obeying him or her – instead, you'd be obeying that part of God's Word that he or she had brought to your attention, right? You'd really be obeying God, not any particular messenger of God, right?

Well, whatever we think about it, the call for the sort of obedience that flows from a knowledge of God and His love for us can be found all over the Bible. In fact, we find it very clearly in the passage from which Paul quotes in verse 17. It comes from the end of Jeremiah chapter 9, which says this:

<sup>23</sup> Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches,

<sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

<sup>25</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh--

<sup>26</sup> Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart."

No, it is obvious that none of us, whether leaders or church members, should trust in our own wisdom or power or riches. Instead we should trust in the Lord who loves us so much and who is so just and righteous. We should seek to know more of Him and to apply that knowledge of His perfect will to our lives. Moreover, we should seek to obey Him because He will one day hold all the world accountable. So, if all that's true, doesn't it make sense to listen to our wise and loving elders, as they help us see the sin in our lives, as they help us learn how to live more consistently according to God's perfect Law of love?

But before we close, we need to look at one more reason that elders should lead in meekness and in accordance with the Word of God. There's one more reason that all the members of the Church should listen to their wise and humble elders, and follow their lead. And we find that reason in the very first verse of chapter 10 – the meekness and gentleness of Christ Himself. In short, we must lead as Christ led, and we must follow as Christ followed.

After all, Jesus had all power and authority in Heaven and on Earth. He could have been the most powerful preacher and the biggest bully the world had ever seen. But instead He chose to lead sinners like us with gentleness, patiently teaching and correcting us. Moreover, He always lived in perfect obedience to the Word of God, obeying all its commandments and even laying down His life in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. And in dying for us, He submitted Himself completely to the Father's will, humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross.

So, what sense could it make for the leaders appointed by the humble Lamb of God to act like bullies or use strongarm tactics? How could anyone who follows Him appeal to any source of truth

except the Holy Word of God which guided and governed His life? And how can any of us Christians fail to follow His example of humble submission to authority?

No, as Jesus gave His heart and His life completely to the Father so that we might be blessed, let us all seek both to lead and to follow only in meekness and gentleness. For the most important thing for both pastor and people is simply to be like Jesus.