

## Chapter Ten

# THE LIMITS OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

The task of the servant of the Lord is to influence and change people. Preaching the gospel changes people's lives. Furthermore, to be a leader in the church means to exercise authority over others. But there are proper and improper ways of exercising authority. This study will present some biblical guidelines for knowing what our limits are.

### A. Imposing Our Will or Persuading People?

Paul says in II Corinthians 5:11 (K.J.). "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord we persuade men and in verse 14 (K.J.) he says, For the love of Christ constraineth us Paul himself was motivated on the one hand by the knowledge of the fear of the Lord and on the other hand he was constrained by love, the most powerful motive. Nevertheless, he could only "persuade" men. In verse 20 (K.J.) he says, "...as though God did beseech you by us, we pray (beseech) you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

Paul understood that he could not force others to obey God, though before he knew Christ he did try to force obedience, Acts 8:3. God Himself does not force man; so neither can we. God manifests His love and woos men by His grace. In the end, love is a more effective force than any form of compulsion. See the excellent counsel of Paul and James on how to treat people, even those in error in I Thessalonians 2:1-13; II Timothy 2:24-26. and James 3:13-18.

A beautiful Greek word "Parakaleo" is used continuously throughout the New Testament. It is the verb form of

Parakletos,” translated “Comforter” in John 14, 15, 16. This verb is translated “beseech, urge, comfort, entreat, exhort.” Paul uses it in II Cor. 10:1, “Now I Paul myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ...”

We know we cannot physically force someone to change, but we must reject all forms of coercion as well. Some have threatened their brothers with a curse. Some, through nagging and continual pressure, oblige others to obey them; some exert pressure because of a signed covenant. Others ostracize those not conforming to their standard of conduct using I Corinthians 5:9-13 as their guide. This exhortation is referring to gross immorality and persistent disobedience in so-called Christians manifesting a rebellious heart. It is not referring to sincere believers whose standards happen to differ from ours. (See Romans 14).

Timid people may be frightened into conformity by threats or pressure, but this does not justify the manner used. We do not “brainwash” people. We can only persuade, and that by love. Our motives must be pure and our manner gentle. Genuine relationships between brothers can only be established on mutual love, and love never forces. (I Cor. 13:4-7).

## **B. Our Authority in an Individuals Life.**

In a local church or wherever there is submission to our leadership there are limits to be observed in this relationship. Here are five guidelines:

### **1. We cannot infringe on another’s conscience.**

One’s conscience is sacred, even though it may not be perfect. We must not oblige someone to do something his conscience says he shouldn’t do (Rom. 14:1-6, 14, 15; I Cor. 8 and 10:16-33). Even when a man’s conscience is seriously warped we must wait for the Holy Spirit to convince him and change his conscience. We give out the Word (Jer. 23:28, 29,) and the Holy Spirit, through the Word, will change his conscience (John 16:7-1 1).

Romans 14 is clear that in matters not of cardinal importance we must respect our brother's convictions.

## **2. We cannot infringe on another's faith.**

In I Corinthians 1:24 (K.J.) Paul says, "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand." A person's faith is the measure of his spiritual growth. We must strengthen each other's faith (Rom. 1:12). If we control people by making decisions for them we are stifling the development of their faith, and in consequence, their joy. According to Romans 14:23 we may even cause them to sin. Believers must be free to make their own decisions so that their faith will grow. They should of course seek counsel, and this counsel should be based on God's Word. Decisions made by the person himself, based on God's Word, will strengthen his faith.

## **3. We cannot presume on another's willingness.**

The book of Philemon provides an excellent example of Paul's entreating Philemon, yet without undue pressure. He says in verse 14, "but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will." Everything one does for the Lord should be done willingly and cheerfully, whether it is ministry, I Peter 5:2, or giving money, II Corinthians 9:7, or doing a favor. Paul could not compel Apollos to go to Corinth in I Corinthians 16:12, although he "encouraged him greatly" to go.

## **4. We cannot presume on another's commitment.**

People do make voluntary promises to the Lord and to the church, and these are not to be taken lightly (Num. 30:2). We should not, however, place our condemnation on them—if for some reason they cannot meet their promise. It is between them and the Lord. Note how diplomatically Paul treats the Corinthians regarding their promise of giving money in II Corinthians 8 and 9.

## **5. We cannot require something that means personal aggrandisement.**

We cannot presume on others being our servants, nor can we require a service or action that would enrich or exalt us. This is totally contrary to the spirit of Christ Who made Himself poor for us (II Cor. 8:9). Paul avoided all such actions as we see in Acts 20:33-35 and I Thessalonians 2:5 and 9. He determined “not to be a burden.” This should be our goal in all our relationships.

## **C. Our Authority in the Church**

Whenever authority is exercised there are limits that need to be recognized. Knowing these limits gives us greater confidence in our ministry, and will keep us from overstepping and offending others. These principles are valid for any believer, whether in the five-fold ministry or in any other position of responsibility in the church.

### **1. Our authority is limited to the responsibility given to us.**

Authority is based on responsibility and both are given to us (Mark 13:34). Throughout scripture we see that authority is given to one by another. This is true in the case of John the Baptist, John 3:27-30; the centurion, Luke 7:8; the disciples, Luke 9:1; 10:19; John 20:21; and it is true of Christ, John 5:27; Hebrews 5:4-9. Authority that is seized is tyranny (Mt. 20:25). We receive authority, and in our use of it we are accountable to the one who gives it to us. There are three sources for our authority: the Lord, the church leaders over us, and the people we serve.

a. Our responsibility and consequent authority is based on **our ministry gift from the Lord**. To a certain extent our ministry gift is the limit of our authority. For instance, a prophet’s authority will be exercised differently from a teacher’s or a pastor’s. Like Paul, we in leadership get our authority from the Lord (II Cor.

10:8). But even as our ministry varies “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7, 11) and according to our measure of faith (Rom. 12:3); so our authority varies.

b. Our ministry and authority are what **other leaders in the church** have recognized and have given to us, Titus 1:5, Acts 14:23. Since our call to ministry is based on a subjective experience, there needs to be confirmation from an objective source, that is, other church leaders.

c. **Our** authority can only be exercised over **those who recognize us and voluntarily submit to us** in the area of our ministry (Heb. 13:17).

## **2. Our authority is limited to the sphere of our responsibility.**

The policemen, the banker, the school teacher, and the pastor all have different spheres of responsibility. The policeman’s responsibility is for physical protection and the maintenance of peace. The banker’s responsibility is in the financial domain; the school teacher’s is in the instruction and conduct of children. The nursery worker is responsible for the care and comfort of the babies. The pastor’s responsibility, and all other church leaders as well, lies in the spiritual sphere. Physical constraints and financial constraints are out. Paul points out the spiritual nature of our authority in II Corinthians 10:4-5 and Ephesians 6:12. It involves speaking the truth, praying and challenging wicked spirits. These our weapons are powerful and much more effective than any material weapon. This is the authority of the man of God (Matt. 18:18; Luke 10:19; 1 Cor. 5:3-5; I Tim. 1:20).

## **3. Our authority must be exercised in a constructive way.**

This is what Paul said about his authority in II Corinthians 10:8 and 13:10. But notice that the constructive use of authority includes punishing the disobedient, II Corinthians 10:6. In actual fact, there is no

authority if there is no punishing of the disobedient. This is true of homes where parents do not punish their children, or the nation which permits wickedness to go unpunished, or the church where sin goes on unreproved and not dealt with.

Faithful discipline of erring church members has in view the restoration of the individual (II Tim. 2:24-26; I Tim. 1:20). It is constructive not destructive. There is no excuse for placing curses on anyone, believer or nonbeliever.

**4. Our authority is limited by our geographical locality.**

Paul points this out in I Corinthians 9:2 and II Corinthians 10:13, 14. An elder in one locality is not an elder in every local church. Even an apostle's authority is limited to his geographic sphere.

**5. Our authority is limited by another's ministry, Romans 15:20.**

Within the local church the musician, the teachers, the various leaders of groups need to respect one another's ministry. Para-church ministries must recognize the local church pastors and elders. Traveling ministers such as evangelists or prophets do not have unlimited authority. They minister under the authoritative covering of the local pastors. Damage has been done by unsubmitted men who come into an area and through prophecy or persuasion have drawn other pastors' sheep after themselves (Acts 20:29, 30). The consequences are often disastrous.

We dare not infringe on another's ministry. The limits of our ministry will be determined by the ministry of other servants of the Lord in our area. Lines of authority must be clearly laid out within the local church. Among local church pastors there must be respect for others' church members and ministries. Traveling ministers need to

clearly understand their limits and cooperate with the established local ministries.

We are all part of one body. Only when we realize this in a practical way will we be able to attain our goal as Paul expressed it in Ephesians 4:7-16.

“...from whom (Christ) the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”