

Spiritual Authority

The controversy of the universe is centred on who shall have the authority, and our conflict with Satan is the direct result of our attributing authority to God. To maintain God's authority we must be subject to it with all our hearts. It is absolutely necessary for us to meet God's authority and to possess a basic knowledge of what it is.¹

The word authority gets a very bad press these days, and perhaps understandably so. The history books are full of evil tyrants who used their authority to diabolical ends, and the newspapers are filled with reports on the incompetence and corruption of various governments. We may also have experienced abusive husbands and parents, little dictators in the office, incompetent teachers, brutal police officers or even authoritarian church leaders. Isn't that enough to put us off authority completely? And yet, this study is based on the firm conviction that God has instituted authority as a wonderful, liberating principle that, when we understand and practice it rightly, will release us into blessing, bring unity to the church and advance the Kingdom of God in our society.

The Principle of Authority

We are going to begin by looking at the principle of authority, and then go on to look at how it should be practised in the church, with particular reference to apostolic authority.

The Meaning and Source of Authority

God has the right and the power to order all things according to his will. There is nothing or no-one that has any right to contradict or withstand the will of God. When we use the word spiritual to describe this authority, we are not indicating that it only applies to

certain areas of life deemed to be spiritual or sacred, as opposed to secular. God's will covers every aspect of life and the universe. Rather, we are indicating that this authority is not enforced or applied by natural means – government edict, legislation, force of arms etc. – but that it is effective in the spiritual, heavenly realms no matter what apparent contradiction to divine will that there seems to be in the natural, earthly realm. For example, in Hebrews we read:

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour.

(Hebrews 2:8-9)

God has made everything subject to his Son, Jesus. That is a spiritual fact and reality. Although we do not yet see all things subject to him (in the earthly realm), yet he is nevertheless crowned with glory and honour i.e. in the place of authority (in the heavenly realms). True spiritual authority still operates, even when people do not recognise it.

Ultimate authority rests with God, and he is the source of all legitimate authority. As we shall see further on in our discussion, however, God delegates his authority to others.

The Importance of Authority

Authority is important as it reflects the very nature of God (see below). It is also important as it is a key to the fulfilling of the purpose of God. God's ultimate purpose is expressed most succinctly in the first chapter of Ephesians:

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment--to

bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

(Ephesians 1:9-10)

The purpose of God is to reconcile, i.e. ‘bring together’ all things, and the only way this can happen is to bring all things under the headship or authority of Christ, because only in Christ do ‘*all things hold together*’ (Col.1:17).

The only way unity, harmony, peace and reconciliation can be achieved in our world is through ‘*all things*’ coming under the authority of Christ. Incidentally, this has to be considered when people talk about church unity. Unity will not be achieved by man’s efforts and attempts at reaching consensus, but when true godly, spiritual authority is rightly administered in the church.ⁱⁱ

The Curse of Independence

When it comes to the church, rightly relating to authority is not about just getting the right governmental structures in place in the church (though this is not unimportant). It is about an attitude of heart that will need to be in God’s people towards God and towards his delegated authorities.

True spiritual authority and a godly submission to it are the complete opposite of the independent attitude that has been the curse of the human race since Adam and Eve took their first bites of the apple. When they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were both rebelling against the authority of God’s Word, and taking to themselves a moral authority that was never meant for them. Their understanding of what was right and wrong was meant to come from simple obedience to the will of God, but they tried to take the right to make those choices for themselves. That is why mankind is now not just in a moral maze but in a moral mess! Man wants to choose for himself what he will do and will not allow another (including God) to tell him what he should do.

Hence it can be said of the whole world, and sadly too often of the church, that we are like society in the times of the Judges:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.
(Judges 21:25)

Our world is in a state of intellectual, moral and spiritual anarchy. And too often the church is no better.

The Beauty of Submission

The opposite of an independent spirit is a submissive spirit. This is not to be regarded as the weak, fawning, timid spirit of the people-pleaser and the yes-man, with an inferiority complex. It is the spirit of one who has the dignity and confidence of knowing who he is and what rights and authority he might have, but the humility and the strength of character to be able to choose to submit himself to another. It is demonstrated most beautifully in Christ. For example, in John's gospel, it states that Jesus knew who he was, where he was going, and that he had all authority, and then straight after it tells us how he stooped down to wash his disciples feet (John 13:3-5). He came as one not demanding his equal rights with God, but as a servant to obey:

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*

(Phil.2:5-8)

Jesus is, of course, the supreme model of this attitude, and also demonstrates how the one who submits as a faithful servant, is the

one most qualified to then be given authority (vv.9-11; Luke 19:17; Rev.2:26).

In a world full of people who are demanding their rights, fighting their corner, pushing their agenda etc., it is a rare and beautiful thing to find people who are willing to gladly and freely submit, not as a sign of weakness but a sign of wisdom.

Areas of Authority

Authority in the Godhead

The principles relating to authority and submission are seen firstly in operation within the Godhead. We know that God is three persons in one being – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are all equally God and yet there does seem to be a distinction of roles and a subordinationⁱⁱⁱ. We witness this in how Jesus speaks about his Father, in the gospel of John:

- He comes because the Father sent him (5:36)
- He comes to do the work the Father has sent him to do (4:34)
- He only wants to do the will of the Father (6:38)
- He speaks only what the Father gives him to speak (8:28)
- He receives his authority from the Father (5:26-7)
- He states that the Father is greater than him (14:28)

In Christ we see perfect submission and obedience to a higher authority. But it is crucial to note that Jesus chose to obey not because he was inferior to the Father. The truth of the Trinity presupposes that all persons of the Godhead are equal. This demonstrates that crucial principle that we are not talking about superiority and inferiority of persons, but authority and obedience in relation to roles

Authority in the Creation

Even the natural world reflects something of the principle of authority and order. When God created, he also *separated* that which he had created into their appropriate spheres (Gen.1:6-7, 14, 18). He set boundaries. The sun and the moon were to *govern* the day and night (1:16, 18). The creation itself speaks of the wisdom of God in the sense of its order, indicative of the principle of authority.

All things are created through God's authority and all physical laws of the universe are maintained by His authority^{iv}

Sin not only brought spiritual disease into man, but disorder into the natural world. Man was created to rule, to exercise authority as God's stewards over this creation (Gen.1:26-28). The result was to have been fruitfulness and growth. But sin and disorder came in as man rebelled against the authority of God.

The Authority of Scripture

God has not only expressed his authority in the natural order, but he expresses his authority and his will far more clearly in the written word of Scripture. The Word of God makes known his will and carries his authority. It was by his word of command that the very heavens were made (2 Peter 3:5). It is our aim as Christians then to order our lives, and submit our minds and wills to the teaching of the Bible.

Because the Bible does not address itself to every specific area of our lives, we need to seek the specific guidance of the Holy Spirit, and exercise wise and informed judgement by the common sense that God has given us all. However, the Bible does give us general principles which should shape our thinking and judgement, and which we will live by.

It is also true that the we have to interpret the Bible accurately and not just collect proof-texts for our pre-determined positions. But we must also be careful of what happens in some circles whereby people effectively rob the Bible of its authority over their lives by ‘interpreting’ away any truth or instruction they don’t like or that doesn’t fit in with the spirit of the age. Of course, we never rob the Bible of its authority in actuality. God’s Word is established and has authority whether we accept it or not! We simply fail to enjoy its blessings when we fail to submit to its teachings.

Authority in the Heavenly Realms

The Bible is not absolutely clear as to all that goes on in the heavenly realms, and much is still shrouded in mystery. That should deter us from pronouncing too rigidly about such things. But enough is said to indicate that there is authority and submission amongst the angelic beings.

There seems to have been boundaries set and places ordered that certain angels rebelled against

And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home--these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

(Jude 6)

Indeed, the Bible seems to teach that the devil was an angel who was hurled down from heaven because he rebelled against God, not submitting to his allotted place (Isaiah 14:13-14).

Another principle relating to authority needs to be considered with regard to this. Submitting to authority will mean that we will accept the place that God has put us in, and not try, through pride and ambition, to break out of our sphere and usurp the role of another. This does not mean ‘accepting our lot in life’ and is not meant to be

used for oppressing people - it has sadly been used this way, historically. But our over-riding desire will be to do what God has ordained for us to do, to gladly accept whatever role he has called us to, and not allow selfish and proud ambition to cause us to grasp at a role or position that he never intended for us. To do so, is to follow a satanic example.

Authority in Society

The Bible makes clear that God ordains civil authorities:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

(Romans 13:1-2; see also 1 Peter 2:13-15)

This is not meant to be taken as support for the idea that God ordains every government regime, otherwise we would have to accept that he instituted some very wicked regimes over the centuries. Rather, he ordains the principle of government, whether humankind uses it well or badly, as a natural and temporal protection against the potential anarchy and social disorder that is the result of humankind's sin and separation from God. Although individual governments may be evil, the principle of government is a gift of grace.

Neither does it mean that we have to directly support each and every government and be uncritical of them. It does mean, however, that we should seek to co-operate by being good citizens – obeying the laws, paying our taxes, taking part in the democratic processes (which may include being critical of the governing authorities at times). And we should pray for all those in authority (1 Tim.2:1-2).

Authority in the Family

Again the Bible seems to be clear that there is authority in the family. The husband is the head over his wife (1 Peter 2:1, 5-6; Eph. 5:22-24; Col.3:18, Titus 2:4-5) and children are to obey their parents (Eph.6:1-3; Col.3:20). This contextualising of authority within the family, as with the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Godhead, tells us something about authority. Authority is rooted in family and fatherhood. It was never meant to be something used to lord it over people, to bully and abuse them. It was to care for and serve them, to release the potential within them. But it is still authority. It is only because, in our fallen world, authority has such negative overtones so often, that we find it difficult to associate such ideas with authority. But in the Bible it is totally compatible with sacrificial love, care, freedom and blessing!

This teaching of headship in the home does not seem to be cultural i.e. specific to the times and places in which the Bible was written. Although it has been both abused and neglected, it is my opinion that a restoration of true headship as the Bible teaches will be a key to seeing healthy marriages and families.

Authority in the Church

In the church, there are clearly leaders to whom God gives authority to lead his people:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

(Heb.13:17; see also 1 Tim.3:4-6)

Given what we have said above about authority bringing liberty and security it is worth noting a prophetic Scripture to show how authority is meant to work in God's Kingdom:

See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

(Isaiah 32:1-2)

It is only when we accept the rule of King Jesus, and his delegated authorities (*rulers*) that true community can be achieved.

We will be looking at authority in the church more fully in the second half, but here we can note two things:

Charismatic and Governmental Authority

It is helpful to distinguish between two kinds of authority. By charismatic authority I mean the authority that all of us can have and should have, for example, to preach the gospel, intercede, prophesy, bring a word of encouragement and instruction etc. All God's people can have, and can grow in, this kind of authority. It is not just that it is given by the Spirit for the operation of spiritual gifts, but it is also related to character. Growth in character gives the authority of integrity and credibility to people.

By governmental authority I mean the ability and right delegated by God to manage^v his house, the church. They do this by bringing direction, including making key decisions, by determining the doctrine that shapes the church, and by exercising discipline when required. This is only to be exercised for those so appointed by God. When the direction and decisions in the church are determined by committees, church meetings or pressure groups, rather than God-appointed authority, there will be trouble ahead!

***Women and Authority*^{vi}**

It is my understanding of Scripture that women are not permitted by God to take positions of governmental authority in the church. This has nothing to do with anything intrinsically lacking in women to lead, as there are many women who do so very effectively in different positions in society. It is rather due to the fact that the church is the household or family of God, and the leaders in the church are to reflect the husband/father who God has ordained as the head of the home

It is to the exercise of authority that we turn in the second part, with a particular interest in the role of the apostle to the local church.

The Practice of Authority In The Church

God has purposed to manifest His authority to the world through the church. God's authority can be seen in the coordination of the various members of the body of Christ^{vii}

If the church is to express and extend the Kingdom of God, which speaks of his rule, into our world, we must get this issue of authority straightened out in practice.

We know, of course, that ultimate authority rests with God. But in terms of delegated authority in the church, who does the ultimate authority for a local church rest with? Since so much depends on authority, we must be clear on this.

Basic Alternatives

Papal Authority

The Roman Catholic Church would be quite clear in its teaching (if not always in its practice) that ultimate authority rests with the Pope who is regarded as God's representative on earth. He decides what

should be the teaching and practice of the church and his decision and pronouncements will be issued to the whole church and be expected to be followed. This is an extreme form of what might be called institutional authority, which some other church denominations also work with to a lesser extent.

Congregational Authority

This is exactly the other end of the spectrum whereby each member of a local church congregation would make the decisions. In the church meeting, it will be a case of ‘one member, one vote’ and the local pastor has no more say than anybody else, although he may be looked to for guidance. The direction and the decisions of the church are affected by democratic process rather than by any one man taking the lead. Some denominations stress the importance of this along with the autonomy or independence of each local congregation from any wider institution.

Local Eldership

This is where a plurality of elders who have been appointed in some way, either by the congregation or an apostle, effectively determine the direction and make all the decisions. There will often be one senior or lead elder amongst the group of elders. Like the congregationalists, they will insist on the autonomy of the local church. This may be, in part, a reaction to the kind of institutional authority referred to earlier.

In our world today there are many such churches led by a group of elders who might ‘relate to’ an apostle or an apostolic team, but where the apostolic input is more inspirational and advisory rather than authoritative. The authority for the local church still rests with the elders.

Apostleship

I believe that it is far more consistent with the NT pattern, that churches founded by an apostle or which have received and recognised a man as an apostle to them, actually come under the authority of that apostle. An apostle will usually have a number of churches that he exercises such authority over, and so obviously the week by week government of the church rests with the elders. The ultimate authority however rests with the apostle. It is not an institutional authority whereby he just sends down decrees to be obeyed. It is a fatherly authority exercised in the context of a familial relationship (1 Cor.4:1). It is also a purposeful and not a positional authority. An apostle does not defend his authority in order to secure position or status, but to enable him to fulfil his commission.

Apostles and Authority

There is much NT evidence that the apostle maintained authority even after he had appointed elders. To the churches to which Paul an apostle, for example, he issued commands, not just suggestions (1 Cor.14:37-38; 2 Thess. 3:12) and he even directly exercises authority when the elders failed to do so (1 Cor.5:3-5). He laid down some rules and practices for all his churches (1 Cor.7:17; 11:16). Again, Paul encourages Timothy, as an apostle, to command and not just to urge (1 Tim.1:3; 4:11, 6:17-18).

Peter Wagner who has written about what he perceives as the re-emergence of the apostolic ministry in recent years, referring to it as a reformation, takes note of one thing especially:

Of all the radical changes in the New Apostolic Reformation, I regard one of them as the most radical of all. It is so important that I have chosen these words very carefully: the

amount of spiritual authority delegated by the Holy Spirit to individuals^{viii}

We must not be slow, out of fear or bad past experiences, to accept what God has confidence in doing – appointing authority to his apostles.

Not everyone will always receive the apostle’s authority. But Paul is clear that even when the people fail to respond to his authority, it is still intact and those who reject his command bear the consequences of their lack of obedience (1 Cor.14:37-38). He is also clear that when there is lack of response, he may well have to be firmer in his authority (1 Cor.4:21; 2 Cor.13:10). This is not lording it over the church, but more like a father having to be firm with an intransigent son. Because he was speaking of *spiritual* authority he knew he was able to pass judgement ‘in the spirit’ irrespective of what the response of those in the local church was (1 Cor.5:3-5).

Accountability

One of the advantages of continuing apostolic authority is that the elders are accountable to an apostle. The people that the elder is leading have the right of appeal to the one who is in authority over the elders. Although the elders are the gate into the local church that even the apostle would respect, the elder does not have the right to close that gate to the apostle and so stop the apostle having access to the people, or the people having access to the apostle. This is a great protection from a local elder or church leader building his own little tyrannical kingdom and abusing his authority. This is why the apostle John felt that he had both the right and the responsibility to address and deal with the problem of an ungodly local leader (3 John 9-10). He would not leave the people to be abandoned to a tyrant.

The question obviously arises, though, as to whom the apostle is accountable. Clearly the buck has to stop somewhere but the protection from the apostle abusing his authority or from losing

direction, is that he will work in the context of an apostolic team and will be open to rebuke and correction from other apostles (Gal.2:14).

Appointing of Apostles

We shall see below that elders are appointed by apostles, but who then appoints an apostle? An apostle is called and appointed by God (Gal.1:15-16; 1 Cor.12:28) but he can only be an apostle to those who are able and willing to recognise his apostolic ministry (1 Cor.9:2). Generally speaking there will be a recognition from other apostles (Gal 1:18-19) and there will always be a period of the proving of his ministry. Ultimately the vindication of any apostolic ministry is the fruit it produces (1 Cor.9:2; 2 Cor.10:18).

In his exercising of authority, the apostle will never think in terms of ownership. He is a steward of the church entrusted with its care by God to whom he must give an account. This protects from an abuse of authority. Paul was clear he had been given authority by God for the church in Corinth, but he was equally clear that the purpose of that authority was to build them up.

For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

(2 Cor.10:8)

As with a father and his children, he does not exercise his authority to show them who's boss, but to help them come to maturity (Gal.4:19). He would often therefore appeal and urge before he would command.

Spheres of Authority

An apostle also only has authority to those churches within the boundaries of his apostolic ministry and commission:

We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory.

(2 Cor.10:13-16).

An apostle may go to other churches in the capacity of a preacher, teacher, adviser, etc. but he will not be able to, or want to, exercise governmental authority to that church. We should note that as well as being clear on where his authority did not reach to he was also very clear and confident about where it did.

Elders and Authority

Elders are the governmental authority on the ground in the local church. They will be appointed by apostles through the laying on of hands and are therefore accountable to the apostles (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Those who have the power to appoint also have the power to hold those who they appoint to account. Elders will also regard themselves not as owners but as stewards, realising that they too must give an account to God (Heb.13:17).

Responsibilities of Elders

The elders are shepherds of the flock of God responsible for feeding, caring for and leading the people. In terms of the government of the church, the elders are responsible for:

- ***Direction*** – they ensure that the church continues in the direction determined by the apostolic commission

- **Doctrine** – it is the elders’ responsibility to ensure that all teaching is in accordance with the apostle’s foundational doctrine and the clear truths of God’s Word
- **Discipline** – where there is immoral behaviour or false teaching the elders should exercise their authority and discipline those involved

Elders and Apostles

As can be seen from above, the elders have a responsibility to carry out on the ground, in the local setting, the commission given to the apostle. They do not see themselves as doing their own thing with just a little bit of help and advice from the apostle from time to time. They are gladly serving the apostle, submitting their gifts and abilities to fulfil his commission.

How beautiful when men can happily lay down their own lives and plans to help fulfil God’s purposes through another!^{ix}

The elders then are doing, in general terms, in the local setting, what the apostle would be doing if he were there (Col.1:7). The apostles had entrusted them (Acts 14:23) and an elder’s teaching reflected on the apostle (Titus 2:7-8).

The apostle and elders will then often work together on settling disputes (Acts 15:6; 16:4) and co-ordinating projects (Acts 11:29-30). There should then be a great deal of trust between apostles and elders, demonstrated, for example, in that the elders and local churches would often entrust large sums of money to the apostle (2 Cor.8:1-21) and equally the apostle would entrust money for the local elders to administer in the local setting (Acts 11:30). Even more importantly, they had been entrusted to shepherd the people of God (Acts 20:28).

Clearly elders will not be unthinking robots who just do what the apostle programs them to do. They will themselves be men of vision, conviction, allegiance to the Word of God, and deep concern for the people of God. There will be times when a local elder may disagree or diverge in his understanding of apostolic teaching or direction. In such cases, many times the elder will be able to graciously defer to the apostle. At other times, he may appeal to and debate with the apostle in a gracious and honouring way, whilst being fully honest and maintaining the integrity of his own convictions. Where agreement on fundamental things cannot be reached and the elder feels unable to submit, he will need to step down from eldership and probably to go his separate way. However, he has no automatic right over the church especially when it is one founded by the apostle who appointed that elder as a steward on his behalf. The elder has no right of ownership over the church.

Apostles and Church Members

When members of a local church feel that the local elder is abusing his authority, acting immorally, teaching false doctrine, or detracting from the vision and mandate of the apostle, they have the right to appeal directly to the apostle. It is fitting that they would follow the biblical practice of first confronting the elder as a brother (Matt.18:15) but, in some cases, because of intimidation or the bullying use of authority, it would be appropriate for them to go directly to the apostle (1 Cor.1:11; 5:1). They should never feel trapped by a local leader with no recourse to another outside of that relationship.

However, a warning must be issued here. The Bible does instruct us not to make accusations against an elder lightly but to include other witnesses (1 Tim.5:19). This must be over something of serious concern, and not just in the case that you are not getting on with the elder! There are many things that just need to be handled maturely in the local church, e.g. by talking things through, being able to defer rather than always get our own way, being honest and open etc.

When a member of a church has honestly done all that they can to address disagreements etc. but no longer feels they have any confidence in those in authority, whether apostles or elders, they should no longer continue under that authority. Again, this must not be done lightly and a Christian should always be willing to put themselves under some leader's authority. I believe people leave themselves spiritually vulnerable and potentially harmful to others, when they are outside the 'covering' of a God-appointed authority.

The Abuse of Authority

It is clear to see from what we've said above that authority can certainly be abused and that is why many people have been put off the whole idea of authority in the church. However, the answer to misuse is not disuse but right use. We must not reject the whole notion of delegated authority. Rather, we must learn how authority is to be exercised in a right and godly way, and, equally, how authority is to be responded to in a right and godly way.

We have already identified, in passing, two key principles of Scripture which will help those handling authority to handle it rightly. Let us look at them in a little more detail now:

Servanthood

The leader is not to see himself as lording it over people - showing them who's boss and getting them to do what he wants

Jesus called them together and 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, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

(Matthew 20:25-28; see also 1 Pet. 5:2-3).

He will see himself as one called to serve God's people just as Jesus did (Matt 20:28, Luke 22:27). This does not mean that they only seek to keep everybody happy and be people pleasers, but that they will be faithful in obedience to God, to do all that is for people's ultimate spiritual protection and growth.

The one in authority will recognise that submission must in its very nature be volunteered, and that attempts to force ones will on others are counter-productive and become an abuse of authority:

Even God, from whom all authority is derived, seeks from men free obedience, not forced servitude. When, on the contrary, authority relies too much upon compulsion, it lapses into authoritarianism^x

Hence, Paul, whilst clear in his authority and therefore his right to command, will far more often appeal and urge (Rom.16:17; 1 Cor.1:10; 16:15; 2 Cor.6:1; 10:1; 12:18; Phil.4:2; 1 Thess. 5:14). In these Scriptures, the word translated is *parakaleo* which suggests an appeal by one who has the authority to command but chooses not to. Sometimes he would both urge and command (2 Thess.3:12).

Another word used is *erotao* which means 'a request made to an equal' (Phil.4:3; 1 Thess.4:1; 5:12; 2 Thess.2:1). Sometimes the apostle will make clear distinction between what is his counsel and what is his command (1 Cor.7:8-12, 25. 40). There is a desire not to lord it over but to work in co-operation with the people of God

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

(2 Cor.1:24)

Stewardship

Those in authority will not see themselves as having any rights of ownership of the people of God. They are merely stewards who have been entrusted with their care. Realising that they must give an account to God for how they have handled God's people will make them guard carefully against neglect or abuse. A true leader therefore desires accountability, and will not seek to protect his position or status.

Authority and Relationship

There are some who say that authority must spring from relationship; that where there is no relationship there cannot be any authority; that trust and appreciation must be established before you can accept someone's authority. It is certainly true that authority should be exercised in a relational context (rather than an institutional one) and that it eases the functioning of authority. But a man is in authority by the call and commissioning of God, not because we like him or get on well with him.

There will be some leaders where we accept their authority without having a close relationship with them, as will be the case with an apostle who oversees many churches. Nevertheless it is desirable that appreciation and trust develop. Apostles are fathers to churches (1 Thess.2:11-12; 1 Cor.4:15; 2 Cor.12:14) and the churches should ideally honour and hold them in high regard and deep affection (Acts 20:17-38; Phil.4:15-16). Equally, elders are spoken of in parental terms, and their leadership will be one of parental care and concern.

Responding to Authority

Having become hopefully clearer on the nature of authority and how it practically works in the local church, we must concern ourselves in

making sure we are properly related to and responding to those in authority. I would make the following suggestions:

- Be in a local church where you acknowledge the authority and oversight of the local elders, and where the elders are themselves accountable to an apostle
- Don't get all your teaching from lots of various sources but allow those you look to as your leaders to feed you and help you to understand the Word of God
- Seek to be diligent in following the direction and teaching of the leaders
- Maintain a submissive spirit, not always feeling you have to demand your rights or fight your corner
- Don't always think you know better
- Have faith for and pray for those who are over you in the Lord
- Don't criticise or gossip about leaders. Be careful about who with and how you talk about any disagreements you have with leaders
- Be faithful in serving diligently in the place that God has set you
- When you have any genuine concerns and questions, share them honestly and graciously with your leaders
- Pray for your elders, the apostle and the team of men working with him. Take a genuine concern for their welfare, and welcome every opportunity to learn from them

I believe that when the church understands the wonderful and liberating power of submission, and rightly understands and applies the principles to do with spiritual authority, neither rejecting it or abusing it, then we will see a surge of growth towards the maturity and unity of the church.

Bibliography

Watchman Nee, Spiritual Authority, (CFP, 1972),
Peter Wagner, Apostles ad Prophets, (Regal, 2000)
David Matthew (ed.) Apostles Today, (Harvestime, 1988,)

ⁱ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Authority*, (CFP, 1972),p.12

ⁱⁱ Look out for a later study on this subject of unity in the church

ⁱⁱⁱ By ‘subordination’, we do not mean an inferior position, but a role in which one person comes under the authority of another in a functional sense.

^{iv} Nee, *ibid*, p.10

^v This word is found in 2 timothy 3:4 in relation to elders/oversees and the original Greek word carries the meaning of ruling, having authority over, presiding over or overseeing.

^{vi} I have written about this in another study in this series – The Role of Women - which you can refer to for a fuller treatment.

^{vii} Nee, *ibid*, p.13

^{viii} Peter Wagner, *Apostles ad Prophets*, (Regal, 2000), p.25. This is an interesting observation, but this is not a book that I could recommend for an understanding of the ministry of the apostle

^{ix} David Tomlinson, in *Apostles Today*, (ed. by David Matthew, 1988, Harvestime), p.25

^x E.Yarnold & H.Chadwick, *Truth and Authority*, quoted in unpublished paper, *The Servant Nature of Leadership*, by Roger Aubrey (1996)



