

# EVALUATING LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTIC MINISTRY

## *SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS*

**By Doug Goins**

Currently in the Christian marketplace there are an enormous number of books, video series, curriculums, and conferences addressing the issues of legitimate spiritual authority and authentic spiritual ministry. The focus is on “how to.” How to become an effective Christian leader, how to cultivate spiritual authority, how to generate effective Christian ministry or how to develop ministry that is authentic and genuine. Much of the material is created by recognized leaders across evangelicalism, people with impeccable, public, powerful personas. They are people who have built large organizations or churches or ministries. I have nothing against the Christian marketplace, as there is good and helpful material on ministry leadership available there. But as I studied our passage this week and looked at what the apostle Paul had to say about spiritual authority and ministry, I saw a contrast between his writing and many of the resources for sale in the Christian marketplace today.

### **Five Accusations**

Paul had a tough relationship with this church in Corinth. In the last four chapters of this second letter he answers criticism from an aggressive minority in the church, people who had recently arrived in Corinth, trying to assert leadership and usurp Paul’s place as an apostle. They had challenged Paul’s authority at some specific points. Although we don’t actually hear his critics’ side, we can surmise the issues from Paul’s responses.

The accusations cover five areas of ministry leadership. First, Paul’s critics claimed that because he hadn’t known Jesus when he lived on earth he didn’t have the same kind of relationship with Christ as they had. Second, they said that the way Paul boasted in who God was and what God did in his life and ministry was unbecoming of a true apostle. Third, they called Paul a hypocrite because he was tough-minded and brave in his letter writing but a coward when he was face to face with them. Fourth, his critics made fun of his appearance and speaking ability. A true leader wouldn’t look and sound like that. The final accusation, which we will consider in chapter 12, is because Paul refused to accept any financial support from the church in Corinth. The leaders consequently deduced that Paul understood he was not worthy of support in his ministry.

As Paul answers these five criticisms, a clear picture unfolds of legitimate spiritual authority in leadership and authentic spiritual ministry in people’s lives. The principles that emerge create a portrait of a leader who is a servant of Christ and a servant of people. The portrait applies to every one of us as well. If we belong to Jesus, we have been called to be his servant and represent him in relationships in the places that God has put us.

We can have spiritual authority or influence in the relationships around us. Our leadership with one another is to be that of a servant, not a boss. Your spiritual leadership may be at home as a parent or a caregiver to the elderly, or it may be in ministry with children, young people, or adults. Maybe it's a ministry of teaching in a small group, or of serving to meet physical needs, or involved with Christians in nurture, or you may be called into the community to have impact as a witness for him. Consider where God has placed you and as the portrait emerges ask God how he can use you as an effective leader.

Second Corinthians 10:7-18 is broken into two main headings. The first one deals with how we evaluate legitimate spiritual authority—the issue of influence. We are affected either by others' influence on us or by how we influence others when we give leadership. The second section focuses on evaluating authentic spiritual ministry. Both of these issues are of concern in the life of the church today. Whether we are single or married, whether we have children or not, or whether or not we are involved in formal, active ministry, these issues affect us.

## **Legitimate spiritual authority**

Beginning the text in verse 7 of chapter 10, we see evidences of God-authenticated leadership in ministry in looking at the apostle himself.

**You are looking at things as they are outwardly. If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. For even if I should boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame, for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present.**

(Verses 7-11)

## **A personal relationship with Jesus Christ**

The foundational issue for credibility in leadership is our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul's critics in Corinth were claiming greater credibility regarding their relationship to Jesus Christ than he could. Perhaps they had heard Jesus preach or had some personal interaction with him, which Paul never had. It is notable in verse 7 that Paul does not try to contradict their own relationship to Christ. He doesn't challenge that. He doesn't fight fire with fire in terms of accusations directed at him. The fundamental question in leadership is, "Do we belong to Christ?" Paul's claim here is that he does.

The good news is that we belong to Christ just like Paul. That was a consistent theme throughout his letters to all the different churches. We are supremely important to him. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature...." This means that our lives reflect Jesus. We learn to live like him. Paul describes a beautiful relationship to Jesus Christ in the last phrase of verse 3b of chapter 11, "...the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." He also warns us against any Christian leaders who want to minimize that simplicity or distract us from that personal relationship.

In terms of personal application, how would people around you evaluate your spiritual credibility in their lives and your authority in leadership? Can they say she does love Jesus with all her heart; there is a newness about him because he is in Christ? Is there a simplicity and purity in your devotion to Jesus? Can the people that follow you say that? That is the first hallmark of legitimate spiritual authority.

## A God-given motivation

The next hallmark comes in verse 8 when Paul actually uses the word “authority” for the first time in the letter. Our credibility in leadership comes from God-given motivation for ministry resulting in people being spiritually built up:

**For even if I should boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame.**

The Greek word Paul uses for authority means “freedom of choice.” A person with a lot of authority has maximum freedom of choice. Somebody under authority has their freedom somewhat limited. Paul was a man who had put himself under the loving authority of Jesus Christ, and out of that voluntary submission, he exercised spiritual authority that created freedom of choice in other people. The contrast in the verse between building up and tearing down is evidenced in leading people into freedom of choice or trying to somehow limit or restrict them. Paul was not authoritarian. His God-given authority was to build people up rather than to control people’s behavior. His purpose was to free them to make choices, to choose to follow the Lord, to surrender to him willingly. Biblical (or spiritual) authority is not synonymous with control or restriction or coercion or impersonal command. It should never be harsh but always distinctly gentle.

This week I surveyed some of the language Paul used in this letter to talk about authority, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy;” (1:24a ). “...I urge you to reaffirm your love for him” (2:8). “...Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (7:1). “I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also” (8:8). “And I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage” (8:10). “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted...” (11:7).

As Paul explains in verse 7, the church in Corinth missed the authority in his approach because they were “...looking at things as they are outwardly....” They were deceived by judging according to the flesh so they couldn’t understand why Paul didn’t throw his weight around, or simply insist or demand and command. They didn’t understand spiritual wisdom at work and therefore mistook that for weakness in Paul. We know that because of the need he felt to defend himself throughout these last four chapters.

Now again, apply this to yourself personally in terms of leadership responsibility God has given you. Think about the individuals with whom you do have authority. Would people say that your leadership is exercised out of your love for God, that he is the one who guides you and motivates you? Are people being built up because of you? Are they being pointed toward Jesus and is there greater joy and love and freedom and adventure and hope? Is there greater opportunity for the people around you to serve and minister or, in contrast, is there inhibition, restriction and frustration?

## **A consistent genuineness**

Verses 9-11 address the charge of hypocrisy. Paul's critics said there was a discrepancy between how he wrote his letters and how he was in person. Paul's response appeals to the people in Corinth who really knew him, those who had been with him from the beginning, had come to Christ under his preaching, and had been there as he ministered among them for a year and a half. The ones who were fomenting the resistance to Paul were the recent arrivals who didn't know who Paul was because they hadn't been with him in Corinth. Paul reminds his brothers and sisters in Christ of his authenticity and the fact that he was consistently genuine.

**...I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present.**

Paul maintains there was no contradiction between his preaching and his writing. He was bold in his letters because that was what was needed at the time. Difficult circumstances required strength. Earlier in chapter 3 he talks about writing this severe letter and in essence says, "When I wrote you that letter it was so painful for me that I wept over it. Those tears were driven by my love for you. That is why I had to say hard things." In 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, Paul makes it clear that nobody can separate his personal life from his ministry with them:

For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.

Let me ask you, "Are you authentically yourself through and through?" None of us can claim total consistency in being genuine people. That is why we need to be leaders who are open and honest and accessible to people that are close to us. We have got to accept constructive, justifiable criticism from those who love us enough to challenge any pattern they see in us presenting ourselves as something that we are not. Leadership calls for genuineness, authenticity, and transparency.

In summary, all three of these hallmarks of legitimate authority are based on relationship. First of all, a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, one that is obvious to the people we are trying to care for. Second, a loving relationship with those to whom we give leadership. God-given authority does admit our responsibility to lead but denies our right to control people. Our influence flows from the fact that Christ himself lives in us and speaks through us. Third, authenticity in relationships means we share our weaknesses as leaders. We take a stand with people who follow us, because they know they are weak and they know we are weak. So there is consistency and transparency in our leadership. That is the basis for legitimate spiritual authority.

## **Authentic spiritual ministry**

The second part of this section, verses 12-18, evaluates authentic spiritual ministry. Again Paul himself is a great model in this area:

**For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding. But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we shall be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. But HE WHO BOASTS, LET HIM BOAST IN THE LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.**

## **Not self-promoting**

In this passage, I see five hallmarks of authentic spiritual ministry. The first one is in verse 12. It is not self-promoting. Paul's critics had come to Corinth with probably exaggerated claims about themselves, and since many people at the church were impressed, Paul thought it necessary to expose what was behind the boasting. He points out that his opponents invented their own criteria for success, making themselves the standard and always measuring up to the standard they set for themselves. J. B. Phillips paraphrases the phrase "...those who commend themselves..." as "...those who write their own testimonials..." Self-commendation: Paul says it's wrong. Those in ministry who do that sort of thing miss the point. He says they are without understanding.

I reflected on this point this week and realized there is so much self-promotion, self-aggrandizement going on in Christendom today. Somehow I got on the mailing list of a Christian ministry that is headed by one man. At least once a month I get expensive brochures full of color pictures of him as well as testimonials of the impact he has had in people's lives. He was a former pastor of a large church and is now committed to a worldwide ministry to promote excellence in leadership. He sells books, pamphlets, video and audio series and for a considerable fee, he gives frequent weeklong conferences you can attend. It is his name, his credentials, testimonials about him.

Then I thought of the wonderful contrast in another Christian leader, Cliff Barrows. I know about him because his son Bob told me about his father when we worked together at Mount Hermon. Cliff has been an assistant to Billy Graham since the very beginning. He has been a key administrator in the organization, a leader of all of the conferences on evangelism, the platform host of the Graham crusades, the choir director and song leader, Billy Graham's right hand man. Yet Cliff disliked big, fancy introductions and wrote a simple four-line introduction that he asked to be read. It introduced him as a servant of Jesus Christ and member of the Graham crusade organization for 'x' number of years. He wanted nothing more said about himself. What a refreshing contrast to the deluge of self-promotional material I receive from the other man. Cliff Barrows understands why Paul is not bold to compare himself with anybody, why Paul will not commend himself, and in Cliff's case,

when it comes to introducing him, he doesn't want anybody else doing that either. That is the first hallmark: it is not self-promoting.

## **Given and defined by God**

Authentic ministry is given by God; it is defined by God; it is controlled by God:

**But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you... (13, 14a).**

Paul had a confidence, which only came from the Lord, that he was doing exactly what God wanted him to do, exactly where God wanted him to do it. He had been called as an apostle to the Gentiles and he says to this church, "You are Gentiles, you are in this sphere; you are in the appointment that God gave me. I am in Corinth because God put me there."

All of us are in the ministry. All of us who belong to Christ have been given gifts of the Spirit that are our equipment to use in the ministry God has given us. Christ has already set you where he wants you to exercise that ministry, in your home, among your family, among those who work with you. In the contacts you have throughout your life, he has given you the equipment and he is teaching you about the resources and the power by which you are to work. He has set you right where he wants you to be; therefore, do not object; do not wait for other circumstances to come your way. That is where God put you. The second hallmark of authentic ministry: God is in charge of it; God directs it, and God confirms the fact you are where you are supposed to be.

## **Focused on good news**

The third hallmark of authentic spiritual ministry is that it is focused on good news. I love the phrase at the end of verse 14, "...for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ." The gospel of Christ means the sum total of saving truth about Jesus. Do you remember how Mark's story about Jesus opens with these words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1)? This good news comes to us through Jesus himself. It is his shed blood on Calvary's cross that allows God to forgive sinners of all their sins. In Jesus, the invitation is given to accept that forgiveness as a gift and to come into a personal relationship with God. That is the best news! Authentic spiritual ministry always has this as the central emphasis. It defines what we are for, not what we are against. So much of contemporary Christian religion is negative, enamored with bad news, focusing on what we are against. But our keynote must be like the apostle: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). That is the gospel of hope; that is good news! Is that what controls you? Is that what excites you when you are doing in ministry?

## **Not ingrown or provincial**

The fourth hallmark is in verses 15-16. Authentic ministry is not ingrown, provincial or self-serving.

**Not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another.**

Genuine Christianity is always outwardly focused. It's not "clubby" or "cliquey"; you don't end up in little Christian ghetto's doing Christian things with Christian people. There is no "circle the wagon" mentality. Authentic Christianity wants to penetrate the world. We are not afraid of the darkness because the gospel of Christ penetrates darkness. We are people in process, people in movement. The attitude is one of anticipating what God is going to do next out there beyond where we are now. Churches that become ingrown and self-satisfied or tradition bound and self-serving stagnate and die.

I'm personally grateful for the new vision God is giving us here at PBC. He is opening ministry doors in teams traveling around the world in outreach, working with other churches in Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Germany, and Romania. Our community life pastor, Carol Lind, has a vision for impact teams, which are intergenerational teams that will travel around the world to represent the gospel of Christ. The great thing is that all of these opportunities are doors that God has opened. They are based on personal relationships and friendships in ministry; it's God at work.

Paul emphasizes another concept in verse 15: commitment to mutuality in ministry, mutuality in spiritual growth. It's expressed in the phrase, "...the hope that as your faith grows, we shall be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you." Paul is not lording it over the people in Corinth, giving them orders to launch him on his worldwide evangelism tour. He is looking forward to learning with and from the people he serves. There is humility in leadership on Paul's part. An attitude of "We are in this together. I can hardly wait to see what God is going to do with us!"

## **God gets all the credit**

The final hallmark comes in the last two verses: God gets all the credit for any success in life or ministry.

**But HE WHO BOASTS, LET HIM BOAST IN THE LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.**

The expansion of that quote is found in Jeremiah 9:23-24. It puts everything in perspective, denouncing comparison and self-commendation. Paul used this quote once in each of his letters to the Corinthians because the Corinthians were steeped in human standards of evaluation, comparison and self-commendation. Again, we are so Corinthian today. The standard for boasting--all we can ever take delight in is what God did--is really important for us today. Looking at other people and comparing ourselves to them is either going to make us feel superior or inferior. Paul was convinced that even if he was forced to speak about his own life and ministry from the perspective of worldly standards (which he will do in a later chapter), the only valid basis for boasting was in what God had done. Paul writes this about himself in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

*But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I'm not about to let his grace go to waste. Haven't I worked hard trying to do more than any of the others? Even then, my work didn't amount to all that much. It was God giving me the work to do, God giving me the energy to do it. (The Message)*

That is not false humility; it's being a spiritual realist.

Paul's portrait of legitimate spiritual authority is compelling, attractive, and consistent. He is a model of effectiveness in leadership and ministry, but we are called to do more than just respect him or emulate him. We are to cling to the fact that the same Christ who was resident within Paul is resident within us. God is not going to call us to assignments we cannot do. He has given us the gifts and resources to exercise leadership. Paul didn't have anything over us, and we can have the same impact that Paul himself had. He was confident in Christ, confident in the hope of glory that the indwelling Christ represented.

I want to close with a contemporary example of spiritual authority in ministry, the life of John Stott. He is known as an influential preacher, leader, theologian and writer of almost 40 books. In her recent sermon on prayer, Judy Herminghaus read a prayer with which John Stott begins every morning of his life. It came from an article in *Christianity Today* celebrating Stott's 80th birthday. The article was written by John Yates, a young man who spent three years as Stott's personal assistant.

*That first morning, as I walked into John Stott's bedroom (my office during daylight hours), I found his 10-page, handwritten manuscript on my desk with a note: "This is an interview for a book written for single people in their 20s. Could you give me your feedback on what I've said, and suggest any changes to make it more interesting or relevant?" Not certain the thoughts of this 21-year-old were of any value, I nevertheless carefully read through the manuscript and listed several suggested additions, deletions and modifications.*

*The next morning, there again on my desk was the manuscript and a note: "What do you think now?" The interview had been rewritten and every single suggestion employed. Britain's world-renowned, 75-year-old writer and teacher had consented to every piece of advice from a recent college graduate on his first day of work... I came to trust him as an authority figure because of how he treated me, and the kind of person he was in relationship.*

*I had learned a key characteristic of John Stott: his disarming humility... "Humility is not another word for hypocrisy; it is another word for honesty," Stott says. "It is not pretending to be other than who we are, but acknowledging the truth about what we are."*

*With a keen sense of the paradox of our humanness he recognizes that we are at once the most glorious creatures in all creation, redeemed by Christ, and at the same time rebellious God-scoffing sinners.*

*This might be a distant theological concept for some, but for Stott it is a fundamental principle, one lived out in the day-to-day details of a busy life. (1)*

That is where the battle for authority influence is won or lost, in the daily details of busy life.



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