

THE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OF LOVING CARE

SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS

By Doug Goins

The apostle John, in the introduction to his gospel wrote this about our precious Lord Jesus:

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Grace and truth. Those two dynamics were wonderfully complementary during Jesus' life on earth. There is a creative tension between the redemptive grace of God and the truth and revelation of God. Both of those dynamics were consistently expressed in the apostle Paul's relationship to the church in Corinth.

Both letters to the church in Corinth focus on grace. Both open and close with Paul commending them to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. He wrote this in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

For all things are for your sakes, that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God (4:15)... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich (8:9).

The grace of God was evident in the passage we studied together previously (Discovery Paper #4655). Paul consistently extended grace to the Christians in Corinth. In spite of their lack of appreciation, in spite of their lack of loyalty to him as their spiritual father, the grace of God was expressed through him in a humble, non-defensive, and unselfish manner.

But Paul was also a man of truth. He was their spiritual father and he was committed to always telling them the truth even when it was difficult. He had always spoken with apostolic authority, but after years of expressing sacrificial love for them he had also earned the right to confront them honestly, to confront them redemptively with God's truth. Paul also writes in the 2 Corinthian letter about the truth of God: "...we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (4:2). Then, in chapter 7 he writes, "For if in anything I have boasted to [Titus] about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth [consistently telling the truth about God, about the message of the cross], so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth" (7:14).

In 2 Corinthians 12:9-13:4, Paul does exercise spiritual authority. And even though this passage has a confrontational tone, it is just as loving and caring as the gracious words that we examined last time. In this passage, we see Paul's insight and spiritual discernment at work. We also see how painfully honest he is willing to be. He is firm and clear about the spiritual realities, and he is modeling the spiritual authority of loving care.

Putting both of these letters together helps to clarify some of the conflicts that Paul mentions in this little paragraph. First of all, there was a history of internal problems in the church. Like Pogo, the Corinthians would have to say "we have found the enemy and he is us." There were also external conflicts coming

from outside the church, influences that made the problems worse. In chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians, we saw that there were factions, parties who had lined up behind different Christian leaders—behind Paul, Peter, and Apollos. There was even a Jesus party.

In chapter 3, Paul told us that this church was incredibly immature. He called them babies in Christ. He said they are fleshly, carnal Christians. Then, in chapters 5-7, he addressed the ongoing problem of sexual immorality in the church. That particular problem seemed to last throughout Paul's pastoral relationship with the Corinthian church. These believers were not willing to pursue purity of life.

We know as well from this second letter that some of the people in Corinth accused Paul of being a hypocrite. Coming from outside the church in Corinth were the men we have met in recent weeks, the false teachers, people called "super apostles," who were undermining the content of Paul's teaching. They attacked his credibility, his credentials for ministry, and they even questioned Paul's character. They said that he was driven by bad motives in his relationship to that church. So this is no small disagreement between Paul and Corinth. There has been friction for several years. This is actually the fourth letter that Paul has written, the third trip that he is going to make to visit these folks. And these are people that he to whom he was a spiritual father. He had led them to Christ. He was their shepherd as much as any one.

Looking now at chapter 12, beginning in verse 19, we see how Paul approaches conflict. His concern is to bring things once and for all to resolution in terms of the problems in the church. There are four dimensions to loving, spiritual authority that I want you to look at in these paragraphs. These are leadership qualities that we have a right to expect from spiritual authority.

First, we see that loving, spiritual authority is insightful, discerning, willing to look below the surface at things that aren't even necessarily spoken. Secondly, we see that loving, spiritual authority is honest. It is willing to tell the truth even when it's not pleasant or comfortable to do so. Next, we see that loving, spiritual authority is firm when it's necessary, willing to deal with sin, to call people to repentance. And finally, we see that loving, spiritual authority is clearheaded, biblically logical, and theologically consistent. Paul opens up this mystery of the cross and how loving, spiritual authority is lived out in real life.

Loving, spiritual authority is insightful & discerning

Paul begins by addressing this issue of insight, of discernment, of being able to address things that may not even be spoken. Paul writes,

All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved.
(2 Corinthians 12:19)

The word "beloved" sets the tone for this section. This is a very personal word. He loves these people in the Lord. He has had a longstanding love relationship with them as his spiritual family. He knows them well enough to look below the surface, to almost read their thoughts in reaction to what he has been calling this foolish boasting that they pushed him into in these recent chapters.

I have four children and they are now all moving into young-adulthood. I know my children very well because I have grown up with them. I know their temperamental tendencies as I have watched their character develop. I hope that God has given me a loving, father's heart of discernment, and insight. And even though they hate to hear me say it, there are times when I can say to them, "I know what you're thinking because I know who you are."

Paul isn't concerned about defending his personal reputation before the Corinthian Christians. The only credibility he really cares about, ultimately, is what God thinks of him. To be straight with God is what counts. He says, "it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ." Paul consistently makes this point throughout both of these Corinthian letters. He writes, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:3, 4).

In the second letter he wrote, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 2:17). The point is, if I am totally straight with God, ruthlessly honest before the Lord about my life and about my motives, then I will be straight with other people. And that is true for us as well. We need to ask ourselves: "Do I care more what God thinks about me than about what others think?"

Paul's says his motives towards these people is to build them up, or "upbuilding"—"I want to build you up in everything"—strengthening them all the time. That seems to be Paul's favorite term when he describes the process of maturing in the church. It is actually a word from the building trade and it means "a building under construction." And, Paul says, "In light of that, all of my involvement with you is constructive. I never wanted to be destructive. I just care about your good, about you growing up, about you being built up."

Not everybody in the church saw it that way, especially when discipline was involved. This issue of discipline is not a popular word today, either in child rearing or in the church. Spiritual maturity is not always an easy process for us in the church. And just as correction is a necessary, if somewhat painful, part of growing up with children, it also serves as a part of the maturing process in the body of Christ. It's difficult for us to see discipline in this way. None of us like to be disciplined or corrected or challenged or confronted. And often we will gravitate to a leader, or leaders in the church who flatter us and make us feel good about ourselves rather than somebody who will correct us, who will get in our face and tell us truth we need to hear. When Paul says in verse 19 that *everything*, or *all* of this is for your good, he means not just the affirmation, not just gracious words like those we heard last Sunday morning in the previous passage, but also words of correction.

Loving, spiritual authority is honest

That brings us to the next section in the passage. Not only is loving, spiritual authority insightful and discerning, but it's honest; it's willing to admit what is unpleasant. Paul writes,

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced. (2 Corinthians 12:20, 21)

Honesty is the courage to tell the truth. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul says that we are to speak the truth in love. Love does have to temper whatever honesty we have to communicate, but we are to tell the truth to one another. And truth-speaking often involves rebuke that is unpleasant. It was difficult for Paul to do and it's just as difficult for any leader in the church today. Nobody enjoys that sort of truth-speaking. But Paul confesses something very interesting: Twice he admits that he is really anxious as he anticipates this third visit to Corinth. First, he admits to fears that when he comes the Corinthians and he will be mutually disappointed in one another because of the quality of life they are having in their

fellowship. He also confesses fear that finding them in sinful patterns of behavior will be humiliating for him and for them, both before the Lord and one another. And, it will cause him to grieve and to mourn over them. The word really means to mourn as if somebody were dead, like grieving over a death in the family.

Paul lists two kinds of sinful patterns. The first deals with sins of community life—sins of the heart, sins of attitudes, and the tongue that reflects the heart's attitudes. Then, he lists sins affecting personal morality. In verse 20, he mentions eight possible vices that he really hopes not to find when he gets to Corinth, each one of which has to do with personal relationships. Collectively, these sins can destroy any family and any church community as well. Notice the cumulative effect as we take a look at each of these "vices."

The first is "strife," which means rivalry, quarreling. It's the Greek word *eris* and *eris* was the Greek goddess of discord. The basic idea of *eris* is fighting over pride of place, competitiveness. Remember that Jesus' disciples argued over who was the greatest in that circle of twelve. They were jockeying for the number one and number two positions in his cabinet, basically wiping out the other ten guys in the circle. Pride of place also characterizes the Corinthian church almost from the very beginning.

The second word is "jealousy," which is really a twin word for "strife" in the Greek language. Literally, it means zeal, but it came to mean a zeal for one's own good at the expense of somebody else. Like the zeal for the things of somebody else—the position, the stuff, the influence, the physical appearance. Zeal for that in somebody else results in jealousy, which is how it is translated in the Bible.

The third one is "angry tempers," passion that wells up and boils over. It's the anger of somebody who is very short fused. This is somebody who blows up at the slightest provocation.

The fourth is "disputes," meaning factions. We said there was already a party mentality at work in Corinth caused by factions based on selfish ambition. This was more than an honest disagreement between good-hearted people who don't see things the same way. This is a bad kind of disputing. The word in Greek defines a self-seeking, political candidate who got into office by unfair means, or a manipulator, if you will.

The next two words go together: "Slander" and "gossip." Slander means libeling, attacking someone's character out loud in front of other people. However, "gossip" is a very different word. Literally, it means "whisperings." Even the Greek word is very automonopoetic, with a sibilant sound to it. It means to whisper in somebody's ear something destructive, something evil against somebody else in the fellowship.

The seventh sin is "arrogance." Literally, it means to be puffed up like a frog, creating the picture of somebody who has an inflated sense of their own importance.

Finally, the result of all seven of these sins is "disturbances." It means tumults, actual anarchy. The word captures the idea of rancorous, uncomfortable public meetings where there is no unity and people are literally going at one another in public.

Again, as we read 1 and 2 Corinthians, every one of these sins have been catalogued and addressed in repetition throughout Paul's time with these people in his correspondence with them. Imagine you are Paul. Perhaps you can then understand his discouragement at the idea of showing up at Corinth and there is still this kind of conflict at work in the body. He is anxious. He is fearful about what he is going to find when he walks back into this spiritual family.

We see a different kind of list in verse 21. These are sins of personal morality—sins of the body. Three qualities in that verse form a downward spiral: Impurity, immorality, and sensuality. Remember, these are Christians. These are people who have been washed by the blood of Jesus. But he knows these sins have been there in the past and he is really concerned they have not been dealt with yet.

The first word, “impurity,” is a general word for moral uncleanness, anything that would make us unfit to be in God’s presence.

The word “immorality,” comes from the Greek word *pornea* where we get our word “pornography.” It refers to specific sexual sins that include fornication and adultery, but even goes beyond that in the Scriptures. It describes prostitution and homosexual offense.

Last is “sensuality,” which describes a wanton defiance of public morality, public decency that even the non-Christian society would agree on. A complete lack of shame. In Paul’s time, the very word “Corinthian” had become a synonym for moral debauchery. In fact, to “Corinthian-ize” meant to fornicate. So it’s not surprising to Paul that in the city of Corinth there is going to be such conflict and immorality. But when those things spill over into the life of the church, Paul falls on his face in grief; he is ashamed and humiliated by their lack of moral discipline. Paul had dealt with these fleshly sins in detail in chapters 5-7 of his first letter to the Corinthians. But some of the offenders were still permitting the old life to take over. They had forgotten what God had delivered them from and how they had been transformed, and they were no longer yielding to the new life in Christ. Looking back at 1 Corinthians, chapter 6, Paul describes the change in them:

Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Paul is effectively saying: “Don’t forget the transforming work that Christ has done in your lives. *Don’t go back* to where you came from.”

How can we apply this to us, both as a church community and as individuals? Earlier we read from Romans, chapter 12, which is the counterpoint to the non-Christian conflict summarized in verse 20 of our passage. Like the Corinthian Christians, many of us have been saved from the moral debauchery described in verse 21. But let me ask you: Is the world squeezing you back into the mold of conflict, back into the mold of immorality? Or, in the power of Christ, are you remolding the world around you? Are you professing Christ, but living out the lifestyle of the carnal Corinthian Christians? Or, in contrast to that, are you incarnating the character of Christ? Remember, we are called to be salt and light, to make a difference. But if we are not salt, if we are not infiltrating a decaying world, then the decaying world is infiltrating us. There is no position of neutrality.

The apostle John, in his first epistle, said that we are going to be in one of two positions. We are either going to be walking in the light, which means that we can reflect light into the world around us. Or, he says, if we are living in disobedience we are going to be walking in darkness.

Loving, spiritual authority is firm when necessary

Now, as we come to chapter 13, we see that loving, spiritual authority is firm when it has to be. It is willing to warn the unrepentant about the danger of sin.

This is the third time I am coming to you. EVERY FACT IS TO BE CONFIRMED BY THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES [Paul is quoting from the Old Testament law, Deuteronomy 17, 19]. **I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well** [those who are continuing in sin now], **that if I come again, I will not spare anyone...** (2 Corinthians 13:1, 2)

Two things are emphasized in these verses: first, church discipline is imminent when Paul arrives; and secondly, sin will be exposed and will be dealt with.

First, in appealing to the Old Testament law, Paul states that he is through warning them even though his greatest desire in this letter is to find spiritual health in Corinth on this third trip. The peace that he is longing for is not peace at any price. Paul never offers cheap grace. Again, it is grace and truth. He will finally exercise his apostolic authority in severity if that is necessary; that is, if the Corinthian church doesn't clean up its act before he arrives. The Old Testament quote is also important to us in terms of dealing with sin in a local church because we need facts, not rumors and innuendo. In Corinth, the presence of witnesses would help guarantee the truth about a matter, especially since these church members were at such loggerheads, such variance with one another about what was true and what was not.

Secondly, Paul says that sin will be exposed. By affirming his return, Paul is exhorting them to clean up their lives, their relationships, and to get right with God and with one another, because when he comes he is going to give the community a "white glove" test—he will open every cupboard, run his fingers along all the baseboards, and look in every nook and cranny.

Now, if the church in Corinth had followed the instructions for church discipline that had been given by Jesus back in Matthew chapter 18, they could have solved most of their spiritual problems themselves. I have spent most all of my life in the church, from boyhood on, and I have witnessed instances where very small disagreements grew into large, complicated problems because the believers refused to obey the directions of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18. Let's look at that passage:

"If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED**. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer." (Matthew 18:15-17)

That means treat him like a unbeliever. And how do we treat unbelievers? We treat them graciously, lovingly, with respect, for we are still concerned for their salvation. In verse 2 of this passage, Paul uses phrase "I will not spare anyone." That means to "spare in battle." What he is really saying is that he is going to declare war on anybody in the fellowship who opposes the authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of God's Word. There comes a time in the medical field when prescriptions fail to solve the patient's problem. That is when surgery must be considered and the patient has to submit to the knife, and that is precisely what Paul is telling them here. If my prescriptions haven't worked by the time I come then get ready for the major surgery of church discipline. And that consistent firmness gives Paul credibility as a gracious person, as a truth-speaking person.

Loving, spiritual authority is logically clear-headed

We come to the fourth mark of spiritual leadership: Loving, spiritual authority is logically clear-headed,

willing to explain what is unclear, biblically insightful, and theologically consistent.

...If I come again I will not spare anyone, since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you.
(2 Corinthians 13:2c-4)

As he has before in these letters, Paul refers to this paradox of the cross. The cross represents life out of death. It represents strength out of weakness. It represents victory out of defeat. Twice in the last verse, Paul writes of the power of God. And that is what all of us as servants of Christ, in leadership, need to rely on. It's the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, resurrection power. We need to remember that Paul's opponents in Corinth were saying, "let Paul prove he is a true apostle." Paul's reply here is like Jesus Christ's: "I am strong when it appears that I am weak." On the cross Jesus chose weakness. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Paul has already defined his own attitude and motives toward ministry back in 2 Corinthians 10, calling it "the meekness and gentleness of Christ." In that same paragraph, he explained his method of spiritual warfare, cautioning his readers not to look on the surface of things, but to look deeper at the spiritual realities. By the standards of the world, both Paul and Jesus were weak. But by God's standards both were strong.

It is a very wise, mature leader who knows when to be weak, and then knows when to be strong when dealing with discipline problems in the church. One of the things I admired about Ray Stedman during his years of ministry here at PBC was that he had a very quiet, conversational manner in the pulpit. His approach to personal ministry was similarly understated. A friend of mine, who had read many of Ray's books, came to visit a number of years ago. After hearing Ray preach, he said to me, "I kept waiting for him to start preaching." My friend was used to a bombastic, loud preacher who was more heat than light. But God honored the 40 years that Ray spent here in ministry because Ray understood what the true standards for ministry were. He had a strong sense that he was ultimately accountable to the Lord. He ministered in the sight of God, in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Ray relied on the power of God to carry out the ministry. He really did live that paradox of "strength out of weakness." He knew how to be weak in Christ, but I also saw Ray at times when he was strong in a number of different discipline settings. Ray knew how to be honest and firm, and biblically clear and insightful, and strong in Christ when that was needed.

In this passage, the apostle Paul models for us loving, spiritual authority, especially authority being exercised when there is conflict. As I mentioned before, these are leadership qualities that we have a right to expect from spiritual authority, including the leadership here at PBC that we choose to submit ourselves to.

So, how do you measure spiritual authority today? Is it by creative, powerful and convincing oratory, or by biblical content? Do you care more about Christian character, or about what the press releases say about the individual? Do you prefer somebody who makes you feel good about yourself, who is an affirming person, or somebody who is willing to tell you redemptive truth when it's necessary?

It seems that too many of us today follow the world's standards when we evaluate leaders in the church. Following Paul's example, it is God's standards that we need to pay attention to.

Loving, spiritual authority is discerning, insightful. It is willing to address things below the surface. Loving, spiritual authority is honest. It is willing to address things that aren't pleasant or comfortable. Loving, spiritual authority is firm when necessary, willing to deal with issues of sin in the body. And finally, loving, spiritual authority is logically clear-minded. There is theological consistency, there is biblical insight, it's willing to be explained. These are the spiritual qualities of leadership we can trust to bring relief when there are spiritual problems in the church.

Lord, we thank you that you are a faithful God; faithful to your own standards, and yet, faithful to your unexplainable, incredible love. You are faithful to pursue us, correct us, to redeem, restore, and forgive us. Help us to walk in the gentleness and meekness of Christ. Make us a people who are loving and gracious. But also, help us to be ready to stand for truth and righteousness, speaking out when necessary. We want to be salt and light in a world of darkness and decay. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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