

THE AUTHORITY OF LEADERS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FOLLOWERS

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I. THE AUTHORITY OF LEADERS: TO HELP THE BODY MATURE

The main Greek term for “authority” in the New Testament is “exousia”. With respect to leaders and their responsibility to followers, the main emphasis in the New Testament with respect to their authority concerning the church is in the realm of building up (i.e., bringing to maturity) the body of Christ¹. Note the following passages:

II Cor. 10: 8 states, “For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority (exousia) the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it”.

II Cor. 13:10 states, “This is why I write these things when absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority (exousia) the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.”

These scriptures seem to indicate that this authority was delegated from the Lord and was given to Paul and others. That it is given to others is indicated in the use of the plural Greek pronoun “hemon” in the original text, translated “our” authority (see the NASB translation, the Greek text, or the word “us” above in II Cor. 10:8). It was an authority given by the Lord. The “our” (“us”) contextually would seem to include at least Paul and Timothy as that is from whom the letter comes (II Cor. 1:1). From other texts we can see that this authority to “build up” is given by Christ in a special way to leaders (Eph 4:11-13, the Greek is emphatic that it is he himself, αυτο~, autos, who gives the authority). Although “building up” is something to be done by everyone with each other (I Thess. 5:11), there does seem to be a special place for it with respect to leadership as leaders are mentioned separately and specifically in conjunction with the body. Eph. 4:11 states,

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be **built** up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and **builds** itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

¹ In addition to this there are a couple other areas where exousia is used of leader’s authority. One is the right to take along a believing wife (I Cor. 9:5) and their right to financial support (I Cor. 9:4, 6, 18).

This authority to build up I want to look at in detail in one of our future studies. However, my first observation here is that the work of leadership is not that of controlling the disciples but to help them develop the wings they need to become mature to be able to go out of the nest and spread the gospel and to love one another. It is more a work of gradually training and equipping them to be “let go” into the world and into the church to express Jesus in their lives as the Spirit leads them. The key points involved in “building up” in this passage would seem to be (1) not doing anything that would destroy or tear them down, (2) preparing them for works of service for the body of Christ, (3) things that work toward the body reaching a unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God, (4) things that bring about spiritual maturity (no longer infants), which seems to be defined as “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”, (5) helping them discern cunning and craftiness of men as well as deceitful scheming, (6) teaching them to speak the truth in love, (7) teaching them how to build the rest of the body up in love, and (8) helping each part (individuals) do its work, its part in the body.

This authority seems to involve much teaching, training, and “helping” of the body from the leaders, toward the maturity of both individuals and the body (i.e. there seems to be authority given to leaders to build up both individually and corporately). So anything that leaders do that hinder the individual or the body from “maturity” and practicing love toward others would seem to be an abuse of their authority. On the flipside, anything done by leaders to bring about “maturity” would seem to be the proper use of their authority. Some abuses of authority would seem to include not allowing people to be free to ask questions, not allowing them to think on their own (i.e., people need to be able to be “convinced” under Christ), not training them to be real Bereans (asking them to be Bereans but not giving them the tools to actually do the work of “checking” out what others say is true), giving them rules to follow they should have been allowed to grow out of long ago (infants and children grow up and need to be given more and more freedom and to grow up into adulthood or they will feel frustrated, resent the leadership, and the body torn down), setting up rules that are not needed which go beyond what is written, expecting advice to be followed as direction, hindering instead of encouraging them to use their “gifts” (i.e., work their part in the body) for the body. **Instead, leadership needs to facilitate the expression of each part to maturity and growth of love and works of service not only in the body but outside as well (as the term evangelist would seem to indicate).** Actions that facilitate this would seem to be the correct exercise of leadership’s Biblical authority. Leaders are to provide avenues for the maturing of their members so that those members grow and radiate the character of Christ. In the spirit of Mark 10:35-45, this will be done by setting the example, being a servant, and giving our lives (as leaders) for the maturing of our people. My experience as a father, tells me that maturity means there will be some mistakes done by me as a father but also by teenage (and smaller) children in their maturity, but I as a parent am there to pick them up and dust them off, to love them, and to gently guide them back to the path of truth. As this is done and the child/teen is given more and more freedom (i.e., my rules and direction for them decreases), the child/teen learns how to make decisions in life to love and exercise their own authority over their own will to follow Christ because of his love for them (i.e., as relationship with me and with Christ increases they make decisions based on that relationship not on rules). This is the road to maturity. As

leaders, let us embrace the goal of gradually maturing and setting our children free in their mind, heart, and soul to love and live for Christ, and to be led by the Spirit. Indeed this seems from these verses to be the correct exercise of the leader's authority.

What about Hebrews 13:17 which states:

17 *Obey* your leaders and *submit* to their authority². 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 (emphases mine)

How should these verses be understood? The word "Obey" here is the Greek word *peitho* which means to "be persuaded" or "be convinced" by your leaders. The word "submit" is the Greek word *hupeiko* which means "yield . . . give way, submit to someone's authority" (BAGD³, 846). The spirit of this passage seems to be a focus on the *heart* and having respect to understand and follow willingly the leaders' lead (compare the Heb. 13:7 context which exhorts us to imitate the faith of our leaders "considering" (the Greek here is *anatheoreo* which means "examine, observe carefully" (BAGD, 54)) the outcome of their faith). This does not seem to be saying that we as followers just blindly obey everything our leaders say to do but have a willingness to learn from their proven life, wisdom, and spirituality, and then to follow them and to yield to them as they lead us on to maturity.

I am thinking that this verse (Heb. 13:17) must be understood in light of the authority that the rest of the New Testament gives to leaders, that of building up (maturing) the flock and not tearing it down. So I would see this verse qualified on two levels:

1. Level One: Christ is Lord. Since Christ is Lord, we must obey him over men. That means that if leaders call us to do something that is contrary to what Christ and the Bible state that we are not obligated to "obey (be persuaded)" or "submit (yield)". Of course if we really look at the meaning of "obey" as "be persuaded" and "submit" as "yield" we will not necessarily automatically follow but will have a heart to obey *through understanding and persuasion* of our leader's life and wisdom *in light of what the Bible says*. This is not mindless obedience. If leaders have to force people to "obey" they are not "persuading" them and not allowing

²The specific word "exousia" does not occur here in the Greek even though the NIV has it in its translation. However, the *concept* of "authority" does occur here. Hence, the NIV is not in error for using that word here. This *concept* is implied in the word "hupeiko" which is translated "submit" as Bauer's lexicon shows (BAGD, p. 54 shows, see note 3 below). The *idea* of "authority" is not limited to merely the Greek use of the term "exousia". Other words carry with them this concept. Context and surrounding words determine the meaning and connotation that individual words/sentences take on in a paragraph. The context here of "obey" or "be persuaded", "submit" or "yield", "leaders" or "those leading you", and the concepts of "keeping watch over you" or "watching over your souls" with respect to "men who must give account" all tie together to speak of some type of authority or responsibility being spoken of here which leaders have been given by God toward the flock, the members of Christ's Body. The question is not IF there is "authority" spoken of here but WHAT TYPE of "authority".

³ BAGD refers to the standard NT Greek lexicon, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 5th ed., by Walter Bauer, translated by Arndt, and Gingrich (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974).

them to be true Bereans. So the Christian needs to obey Jesus over leaders when those two come into conflict. As for followers, there needs to be a willingness of heart to “be persuaded” and a willingness of heart to “yield” in every way that does not conflict with the Bible as long as it is in the realm of the leader’s God given authority. If this is not the heart of the follower, there needs to be a change of mind, a repentance on the part of the follower.

2. Level Two: Leaders have authority to build up and mature the flock. We need to obey our leaders as they exercise this authority in the realm that it has been given by God. That authority seems to be in the general area of helping the flock “mature” in knowledge of the Bible, “mature” in their character of becoming like Christ in their character and actions, and “mature” in unity through understanding how to use their special talents (“each part doing its work”) together with the rest of the body for the building up of the body as a whole. The exact detailed nature of that “building up” needs to be looked at and determined further. But in general, obedience to leadership that attempts to exercise any other “authority” than given in the Bible would seem in my mind to be excluded in this command here in Hebrews based on the use of the term “exousia” (authority) in the New Testament with respect to leadership of God’s people. The details of this decision to not yield would need to be looked at very closely from a Biblical standpoint before one decided to not yield. We as followers are not free to go our own way just because we *think* leaders are attempting to lead in a way that is out of the bounds of their authority. If we think they are leading in an unbiblical manner, we need to discuss it with them and come to an understanding together about it before making the decision to not follow.

So, in summary, we as followers need to have the *heart* to be persuaded by our leaders and to have a *heart* to yield to their leadership when (1) what they ask does not contradict what the Bible says and (2) what they ask is part of the “building up” or “maturing” us as individuals and/or the body as a whole. When leaders attempt to exercise authority not given to them by God, we are then obligated as brothers and sisters to respectfully correct and admonish them and to help them mature in their leadership.

II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FOLLOWERS: TO HAVE THE *HEART* TO BE PERSUADED AND TO YIELD AND TO KNOW OUR LEADERS

If our leaders are committed to indeed following *only* the authority God has given them, then we as followers are obligated by God to give them the benefit of the doubt in having the *heart* to be persuaded and yield to their leadership. If we have problems doing this, we need to ask ourselves if we have preconceived notions and thoughts about their intentions, their ability to change, and their commitment to be different from the past. We also need to check things out thoroughly with them before making any accusations in our thoughts (let alone our speech) about their motives and actions as being beyond their authority. This is a metanoia (repentance or change of mind) need on our part. No matter how much some may have felt or were “abused” in the past, this is an opportunity to

work toward personal growth, reconciliation, and trust. It is an opportunity for growth in maturity. It is an opportunity to become more Christ-like on our part as followers. It is an opportunity to have open communication in a loving way and to change our thinking. We as followers have the opportunity to catch those “old” thoughts, those “old” concepts and presuppositions we have about leadership, take them captive, and bring them into obedience to Christ (II Cor. 10:5). What is your and my attitude toward leadership, and especially the leadership of your individual church? What kind of feelings and thoughts come to mind when we think about leadership? If they are negative, are we able to capture those critical or untrusting or presuppositional accusing thoughts that how leaders were in the past are how they are now? If we still have negative thoughts even after capturing them, will we go and respectfully discuss it with the leader in question to make sure we are not off base in our assumptions? We have a chance here as Christians to be free from our old mindsets and from the past and to be reconciled with our leaders.

On the other hand, if we find leaders who are not staying within the bounds of the authority given them by God, then it is our responsibility as brothers and sisters to confront them (respectfully) on their sin and to help them change. In doing this we will be exercising our responsibility to “encourage *one another* and build each other up” (I Thess. 5:11).

So our first responsibility as followers is to have the *heart* to be persuaded by our leaders when we differ in thinking, and the *heart* to yield to their guidance and leadership in their work to help us mature and be like Christ. Secondly, it is our responsibility as brothers and sisters to encourage our leaders to change when they are overstepping the bounds of their God given authority.

There is at least another responsibility that we have toward leadership. It is the responsibility of *knowing* and *respecting* our leaders. It is found in I Thes. 5:12-13. This verse in the NIV states:

12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work

Paul asks us to “respect” those who work hard among us. The term “respect” in Greek is the word “*oida*”, which means “*to know*”. It has the meaning of “*take an interest in someone, care for someone*” (BAGD, 559). It can mean “*appreciate the value of*” (Leon Morris, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 98). In conjunction with the concepts of “*over you*”, “*admonish*”, “*hold them in highest regard in love because of their work*” the concept of “*respect*” does seem to be part of the meaning of “*to know*” them. But to “*know*” them also implies *relationship* and understanding. In other words “*to know*” our leaders would be to understand the work they are doing, their hearts, their dedication, their life, and their love for us. It is our obligation to get to know them and their work and not to pass judgment on them in the absence of that knowledge. Our love/respect must not be there just because of position but because of *relationship*. We respect them because we “*know*” them relationally, they have helped or are helping us and others grow (they admonish us), and we have or are experiencing their work. Let us come to know them and their work among us. Again, respect is not just because they are “*over*” us (although that is not excluded from the

reasons to hold them in high regard) but because we “know” them. Do you know, really know, at least some of your leaders?

The word “over” in “over you” here is the word *prohistemi* which the Greek lexicon defines generally as “*be at the head of, rule, direct*” but can also mean “*be concerned about, care for, give aid*” (BAGD, 713-14). Because of the context I am inclined to see it as encompassing both meanings as leaders in the New Testament are commanded “to give aid” and “to care for” the flock as well as “to direct” and “be leaders”. This also goes well with Heb. 13:17 which says, “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account”. They are responsible for the flock. The word for “keep watch” is the Greek word “*agrupneo*” which means “keep watch over something, guard, care for it” (BAGD, 14). Leadership is all about “caring for others” and helping them mature. This is a *servant* authority (in contrast to *dictatorial* authority), an authority taught in the Bible by Jesus and given to leaders (Mark 10:42-45; I Pet. 5:3). It is a relationship where leaders are to be servant leaders, leaders like Jesus who, yes, have authority but it is authority to help the flock mature and become like Christ, not an authority to just make people do things. Servant authority must proceed out of the heart of the servant-leader, a heart that desires deeply the well being of the flock and their maturity to be more and more like Christ.

I believe our present leaders in the church I am a part of have this heart as I have seen it and experienced their humility and desire for the best for God’s people. How do you view leadership? How do you view “authority”? How do you view the leadership in your church? Is your view Biblical? Is it based not solely on “position” but on your “relational knowledge” of their hearts and what they are actually doing? If it is, if we really know them, I believe we should be able to easily appreciate them, respect them, hold them in highest regard, love them, have a heart to listen to them and be persuaded by them, and yield to their direction. Let us work toward that goal of “knowing” our leaders in a relational way. If you are at that point, you can help others to have this mind set also and be free from the past. If you do not have this heart right now, there is help. Anyone of us can have our minds transformed and be free from our past and to love our leaders. If our leaders need help to change, we can respectfully and lovingly encourage them to a more Biblical leadership expression. When this is done Biblically, I believe there will be harmony in the church between leaders and followers.