

The word “authority” raises concerns in our generation. Our culture views authority as something to be grimly endured or simply overthrown.

It was already in the 1970s that the common bumper sticker first appeared with two words, “Question authority.” There are not many such bumper stickers anymore, because the message has been fully embraced as the default position of our society. Today, if you want a radical bumper sticker, you would have to write, “Don’t question authority.” You would get a reaction.

Here is what we find interesting about the idea “question authority.” It implies that there is authority, and that we cannot simply do away with authority. The bumper sticker did not say, “Do away with authority.” Everyone recognizes that there is no such thing as a society without any authority, a society with non-authority. There cannot be a complete absence of authority. Even if someone were to overthrow the authority, there would be a new authority in town, and everyone would begin to question that new authority!

All of this is background to why people today don’t like chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians. Paul claims a position of authority, as an apostle, and here even as a spiritual father. In claiming that he is an authority figure, Paul then asks the people not just to heed him, but even to imitate him. To top it off, Paul warned them that if they did not, he possessed the authority to discipline them!

As we study this last section of chapter 4, we have to see the difference between authority and authoritarianism. Authority is being in a position or having the ability to influence other people. To give instructions and make commands for the good of others. But authoritarianism is enforcing a strict obedience to certain human leaders at the expense of those people retaining any personal freedom in the matter. It is when authority figures fail to show concern for the concerns or opinions of others, that the authority figures become domineering, like dictators. That is authoritarianism. Godly leaders exercise a type of authority that is seeking the good of everyone, in harmony together with each other.

The Corinthians were in rebellion against authority. Yet Paul still came to them with fatherly care, not authoritarianism. Paul did not want to use his apostolic authority to discipline them. Paul preferred that they would respond to his stern warnings and follow his example. But Paul left the decision in their hands!

In the previous passage, Paul had sternly rebuked the congregation with a tone of sarcasm, nearly mocking them for their errors. Beginning in verse 14, that previous tone was now abruptly replaced by a soothing tone of tenderness and affection, as a caring father reasoning with his wayward children. These are people that Paul knew, and despite their exasperating behavior, Paul clearly cared for them. In verse 15, Paul called himself the spiritual father of the believers in

Corinth. This simply meant that Paul was the first missionary to ever preach the gospel to them, and it resulted in their conversions. Paul led them to Christ, resulting in a spiritual new birth from above, so God in heaven became their heavenly Father, and Paul became their spiritual father on earth.

So, there exists a legitimate type of human spiritual fatherhood, human spiritual authority, and we Christians need to understand it and practice it in all of our churches.

Christ calls us to follow Him, and He provides spiritual guides.

1. Many people claim to be our spiritual guides. (v.14-15a)

(v.14-15a), "I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers."

God uses human instruments for spreading the gospel, and Paul had been that human agent in Corinth.

Why did Paul write about this? Not to make them ashamed, but rather to admonish them as Paul's loved children. Admonish is the word nouthetic. Nouthetic counseling is helping people to see the results of their actions, and make good changes.

Since they were Paul's children, what did that make Paul to them? Their father!

Verse 15 has the word "guides." This was a person in ancient culture that we don't have today – closest is a live-in nanny who is also a private tutor. For us, it would be a nanny, a tutor, a bus-driver and a life coach all rolled into one. The main role of a nanny-tutor was caring for the student out of paid duty or out of obedience to the instructions given.

The word countless is myriad, which means thousand. You may have ten thousand nanny-tutors. Those all serve for the purpose of protection, guidance, and general supervision of the student when the parent is absent. All of these other people look after you, attend to your needs. The nanny-tutor is not mainly motivated by love for the child

If a parent guides you, it is entirely from parental love. The parent is willing to lay down his or her life for the student, but the coaches, bus-drivers, and tutors have a different stake in the matter.

In the spiritual realm, many people claim to be our spiritual guides, but there are very few who relate as a parent. You have ten thousand teachers, but only a few have actual spiritual authority from God in your life.

Paul wrote, *"For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers."* Who actually has authority in your spiritual life? The Christian leaders that God has placed in your church.

2. God has raised up true spiritual guides for us. (v.15b-19)

(v.15b-16), “For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. 18 Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.”

When Paul wrote, “I became your father in Christ – through the gospel” Here when Paul wrote, “father in Christ” Paul was referring to their conversions, their faith-union with God. How did Paul become their father in Christ? “through the gospel.” This word gospel should be understood here in action mode, Paul became their father through Paul actively bringing them the good news, through Paul’s preaching of the gospel to them.

Parents demonstrate how children in the family are to live in that family. Little eyes watch the parents. There is a huge responsibility in being a parent. The young child wants to go where the parent goes, and do what the parent does. This parental status of Paul was why Paul could write in verse 16 that they now needed to imitate Paul.

If every believer were just like Paul, what sort of church would it be?

Paul was the pattern, and they were to take Paul as their pattern and attempt to repeat his pattern. Paul was the example, and they were to imitate his example or use his life as a model for their own lives. By their conduct, they were to prove their parentage – to show that Paul was their spiritual father, and that Paul had influenced them, trained them well. Paul was saying, take your cue from me. Which is what? The lifestyle of the believers in Corinth should reflect the experience of having-died-with-Christ, and risen-again-with-Christ. The apostle had died with Christ. So also, every believer had died with Christ and risen again with Christ.

Verse 17, “that is why...” All these things that Paul had written about imitating Paul were the grounds on which Paul sent Timothy to visit the church in Corinth. The presence of Timothy, a child of Paul’s in the Lord, would remind them of Paul’s ways in Christ. Timothy would be a live example among them of a flesh-and-blood living out of the gospel of the cross and empty tomb. Timothy was the sermon illustration! Paul was writing these things, and Timothy was acting it out in real time! Paul was teaching the same things everywhere in every church, but it was Corinth that had the advantage of having the role model of Timothy visiting them.

If every church member were like Timothy, what sort of church would there be in Corinth? If every church member were like you, what sort of church would your church be? Timothy exemplified the gospel lifestyle. Timothy was found faithful. Timothy’s conduct was a teaching tool. All the churches were being

formed the same, it was the Christ-pattern, the Paul-pattern, the Timothy-pattern. All the churches of Paul were unified as one, and were holy, catholic and apostolic churches. The churches of Paul were consistent. The example of Christ, and Paul and Timothy are consistent. The teaching and the living are consistent with each other. All spiritual guides must line up with both teaching and living with what has been established in the Christian churches everywhere.

Verse 18, Paul wrote that some people were ‘puffed up’ or “*arrogant.*” They believed that only Timothy would visit, and Paul would not visit. Verse 19, Paul corrected that notion by writing that Paul himself would come, and furthermore, that Paul would come soon. What would Paul do when he arrived? He would find out not their talk, but rather whether their living matched up to their talk. Paul did not want to investigate their words only, but their lives also. The parental task is not to hear the right answer, but to keep at it until we see the right behavior. Christianity is not just talking right; Christianity is also living right!

3. True spiritual guides show kingdom power and love. (v.20-21)

(v.20-21), “For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. 21 What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”

Verse 20, the word power derives its meaning from its contrast to talk. So, the central point of power was the possessing of the ability to carry a deed through effectively, and doing so. The kingdom of God refers to the present reigning of God, the current activity of God. We like the C.S. Lewis phrase – Aslan is on the move. Where is the kingdom of God seen in power today? Where is ‘on the move’ today in your life and in our lives? Not in what people merely say, but rather in what people actually DO! Not in only their talk, but rather also in their power, their ability to make things right. What did Paul want to find out when he came? In verse 19, Paul when he came, wanted to find out not just the talk of these puffed up people in Corinth, but their power, their ability, their actions in unifying the church. Paul did not want to discover which rhetoric prevailed, but rather whether their living showed the reality of God building up, purifying and unifying His church through Christ to a place of peace.

Verse 21 – So, Paul puts the question to the people of the church- *what do you wish?* It could well be translated, “*which do you wish?*” Or, what’s it going to be? Paul was communicating that the choice was actually up to them!

Verse 21, based on their answer, Paul was deliberating about which approach to use when he arrived, and Paul was ready for whichever one was needed, whichever one was better for their needs. A mother says to the children – just wait until your father comes home! Here it can be said to the rebellious church – just wait until your apostle comes home! Two options were given: a) Paul could lovingly approach them with a rod in his hand – the rod of correction. Or b) Paul could lovingly approach them in a spirit of gentleness. Paul wrote similarly in

another place, when writing in a mirror context about correcting and restoring another church, in Galatians 6:1, "*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*" The question for Paul in both places was not the question of whether Paul should be a big meanie or Paul should be loving. Rather, for Paul his approach would be always loving, whichever of the two approaches Paul needed to take. He is like a father. The question for father Paul was whether his love should be expressed with a rod, or his love should be expressed with a spirit of gentleness. Does the child need a spanking or a hug? Either way, the parent loves the child, and takes actions of love. A spanking is love. Discipline is love. The parent who spanks the child loves the child enough to correct that child. The parent who hugs the child loves the child and recognizes the greater need in that moment is for the gentle approach on that occasion, because the child is already beginning to see his own wrongs.

Please notice that Paul's decision about which way to show love is not based on Paul's own mood. Rather, Paul's decision was to be based on the response of the Corinthians to the admonition that Paul gave them. I remind you that we saw this truth clearly in verse 14, when Paul explained that his reason for writing was to admonish them, not to shame them. Verse 14, "*I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.*" Paul loved them enough to admonish them. Then, based on their response to Paul's admonishment, Paul would love them further by either the love of applying the rod or the love of applying the spirit of gentleness. The spanking or the hug. Often in parenting, it is the spanking followed by the hug.

Both are the role of the father, the role of the parent, the role of the spiritual authority. The parent asks – in which of these 2 ways am I to come as a parent to this situation to relate to this child here and now? Which is needed here? Which form of love is needed today? Paul is reluctant to bring matters to a head, but Paul remains resolved to do so, if there proves to be no other way forward.

Conclusion: What if understanding spiritual fatherhood, what if grasping the importance of having true spiritual guides, having true spiritual authority from God was an essential key for local churches to experience the movements of God's power in our lives and in our church's unified community of fellowship?

SI – most major cities have orchestras. Each musician is talented. They could play any music that they want. But if they want to play as an orchestra together, they need to follow the authority in two forms - the score of musical notes, and the direction of the conductor. Musicians know that there can be various musical interpretations of the musical notes. If the musicians were each to follow the conductor, they would be seeking the good of the orchestra community and even the audience would enjoy the beautiful results. That was what was needed in Corinth. The violins all followed one violin player, and she wanted to

play fast. The brass were all playing too loud, because that is what brass tend to do. The percussion were off beat, which threw everyone off. Paul was calling them all to look back at Christ the conductor, who had written the musical notes and then had sent them Paul to organize and lead them to play beautiful music again. If only they would follow the two forms of authority, written instruction and human authority! Then it would be a beautiful thing!

We all want to play God.

We want to sit on the throne of our own lives and judge everyone around us. But what is God like? What is true authority like?

The ultimate authority of the universe lays down His authority in order that others may flourish.

Do we still want to play God? Authority is nothing without love and care.

God the Father eternally loved God the Son. But God the Father decided to love us so much that He sent His Son to die for us. God exercised true power and authority by this act. Furthermore, God exercised true power and authority by raising Jesus again from the dead.

What we were meant to be as those made in God's image and redeemed by God's Son is people yielded to God's authority, receiving Christ crucified and risen, and spending our whole lives laying down our lives for others.

True authority is not about laying down the hammer.

True authority is about a family type of affection that longs to see another person flourish. Only when we have received this self-giving authority can we become self-giving followers and then take positions of self-giving authority.