

The Imperfect Church – 8
 The Accountable Church
 1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Introduction

In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7, Jesus clearly establishes his authority over what to believe, how to live, and what it means to follow him. Those hearing him that day picked up on that reality.

Matthew 7:28-29 – ²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught with real authority—quite unlike their teachers of religious law.

The next few chapters in Matthew flesh out this idea and show the depth and reach of his authority. Matthew chronicles several healings (authority over the body), numerous commands, and other miracles like Jesus calming the storm (authority over nature). One of the accounts in Matthew 8 zeroes in on this idea of authority.

Matthew 8:5-10,13 – ⁵ When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, ⁶ "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain."

⁷ Jesus said, "I will come and heal him."

⁸ But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it."

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel!... ¹³ Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, "Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened." And the young servant was healed that same hour.

TS – there is this reality about Jesus that this Roman officer recognizes from his service in the military. Authority matters. Just as he can order soldiers under his leadership to accomplish certain tasks, Jesus can perform miracles because all things are under his leadership. He has authority. In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul borrows this concept and shows us how it works in the church.

1 Corinthians 4:14-21 – ¹⁴ I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. ¹⁶ So I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷ That’s why I have sent Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you of how I follow Christ Jesus, just as I teach in all the churches wherever I go. ¹⁸ Some of you have become arrogant, thinking I will not visit you again. ¹⁹ But I will come—and soon—if the Lord lets me, and then I’ll find out whether these arrogant people just give pretentious speeches or whether they really have God’s power. ²⁰ For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God’s power. ²¹ Which do you choose? Should I come with a rod to punish you, or should I come with love and a gentle spirit?

TS – this is a transitional text in 1 Corinthians. For four chapters now we have followed his arguments about wisdom, the Gospel, their disunity...now these are coming to a formal close. In fact, he bookends this opening section of the letter. 1:10 – “I appeal to you...” and 4:16 – “So I urge you...” are the same phrases in the original language. He has come full circle now to complete his introduction. Fittingly, he transitions here out of his concern over their disunity with an appeal to authority. It is fitting because from this point on, he will unleash an onslaught of confrontation and condemnation for their rebellious and sinful ways. If you think 1 Corinthians has been hard-hitting so far, you “ain’t seen nothing yet.” In preparing them to hear what God has to say to them, Paul highlights three truths we must understand:

1. AUTHORITY TO EMBRACE

When God created the world and set about to fill it and form it, he established a system of authority to govern it. God obviously sits at the top of that system with ultimate authority. That is what we mean when we say that God is sovereign...He alone ultimately rules and reigns over his creation. But God is also generous. He has handed out measures of authority to different parts of his creation. Genesis 2:15 tells us that God placed Adam into the Garden of Eden and set him to “tend and watch over it.” Older translations say God gave Adam “dominion” over it. Humanity, under God’s authority, has a measure of authority over the Earth. We cultivate it to grow food, utilize it for housing, and harvest its materials to create culture. With that authority also comes the responsibility to care for it.

Throughout the Bible we are introduced to different facets of this “handed-down authority” God gives to us. In Romans 13 we find this same idea also applies to the government.

Romans 13:1-7 - Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. ² So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. ³ For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. ⁴ The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. ⁵ So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.

⁶ Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.

God has set up the system of human government and has granted them authority. He even says they are "God's servants," not in the sense that they all serve God (because some certainly do not) but in the sense that they are placed in power by God and are serving us on his behalf (that's a really popular message in today's political climate!). We see the same truth in Ephesians 6 as the Bible establishes parents as an authority set up by God.

Ephesians 6:1-3 - Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. ² "Honor your father and mother." This is the first commandment with a promise: ³ If you honor your father and mother, "things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth."

All of these examples of authority are set up by God, granted a measure of God's own authority, for the purpose of human flourishing in the world. And though at times we may internally rebel against such authority (some rebel externally and get in huge trouble), we understand it as necessary. Kids without parents, citizens without police, nations without government...anarchy would reign. Yet when it comes to the Church, people seem to want to think that this is an "authority-free" environment. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that is absolutely not the case.

Hebrews 13:17 - ¹⁷ Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.

From texts like Acts 20, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5, we are told that these spiritual leaders we are to obey are the Elders of our local congregation. God has set up a system of authority even in the church. Without it, anarchy would reign. This is what Paul is getting to in 1 Corinthians because anarchy is reigning there, apparently because they are rebelling against God-ordained authority. Let's go back to how he began:

1 Corinthians 4:14-15 - ¹⁴ I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you.

There is a dramatic shift in tone as he starts v. 14. He had been quite harsh with them in the previous section, even utilizing sarcasm to make his point. But he wants them to know he is not doing that to embarrass or shame them. His purpose is much higher than that. From a place of love for them, he is writing all this as a warning. The word he uses for warning has the sense of "rebuke" to it. So he isn't offering suggestions to them or offering them some "safe space" where their feelings will never get hurt. He is in their face, finger pointing with the truth of the Gospel, confronting them with the sinfulness of their actions. And he has every right to do so. He is their spiritual father.

This warning he gives to them, though harsh, is from the heart of father to his "beloved children." They may have 10,000 (hyperbole...a gazillion) teachers in their lives, they only have one father. The term he uses here for "teacher" is *paidagogos*, the slave in Greek culture that was in charge of ensuring safety and moral discipline for the children of their Master. It is where we get our contemporary ideas of pedagogical concepts associated with different methods of education. As important as this person was to the upbringing of a child, they aren't the father.

When Paul planted the church and "preached the Good News to them" he became their father in the faith. This is what Paul means elsewhere when he refers to Timothy (and others) as his "son" in the faith. It is the same words one would use to refer to a biological parent/child relationship, showing this kind of relationship is just as real. So this authority Paul has with them is the same kind of authority any parent has over their children. As an Apostle commissioned by the Lord, and the one who introduced them to the Gospel, he has every right to confront them. As we will see time and again over the next several chapters, without this exercising of proper, godly authority, the church gets grotesquely off-course and dishonors the Lord.

As the New Testament progresses and we see how the early church developed in the 1st century, we see the Apostles dying off. But that doesn't leave churches without leaders. Paul saw to it that the authority he had been granted by the Lord was passed down to others and shared with a new group of leaders in each local congregation called Elders. Just as there is with any other area of life and culture, God has gifted the church with those who operate with (and under) his authority, to govern the church and ensure its flourishing.

2. EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW

1 Corinthians 4:16-17 - ¹⁶ So I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷ That's why I have sent Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you of how I follow Christ Jesus, just as I teach in all the churches wherever I go.

"So..." therefore, since Paul has authority, he calls on them to imitate him, to follow the example he is setting. "I urge you..." is the Gk. word *paraclete*, coming alongside. This is another reminder that his confrontation of them is not from a place of anger, but as a loving parent. He is coming alongside them, urging them, pleading with them, to follow a better way. His word for "imitate" is where we get our word "mimic." But he isn't just calling them to copy an action here or there. This is an all-encompassing call to holistically follow his pattern of life. How can he call on them to do that? V. 17 – Timothy "will remind you of how I follow Jesus Christ." This is pretty common for Paul to say. He frequently calls for us to imitate the faithful:

1 Corinthians 11:1 – ¹ And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 – ⁶ So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord.

2 Thessalonians 3:7 – ⁷ For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you.

Hebrews 6:11-12 – ¹¹ Our great desire is that you will keep on loving others as long as life lasts, in order to make certain that what you hope for will come true. ¹² Then you will not become spiritually dull and indifferent. Instead, you will follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and endurance.

Hebrews 13:7 - ⁷ Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.

This all speaks to the authority and responsibility of the leader, as well as the response of the follower. Leaders have authority, established by God. But that is not to be any form of selfish authority for their own personal gain. Leaders are in the position they are in so that they can set an example to those who are following them. This is certainly true for Elders.

1 Peter 5:2-3 - ² Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. ³ Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example.

Leaders lead with God-given authority, and much of that authority comes from what we would call today "moral authority." We follow them because we see what their life produces, that they are getting some things right, and that they are worthy of my following. This is why of all the qualifications listed for Elders in the New Testament, only one of them is skill-based. The rest of them are character qualities.

Robert Thune - "Elders are to lead the church by example (1 Peter 5:3). The *kind of men they are* is a crucial component of their leadership. Qualified elders have integrity of heart. They're not in it for the position, the title, or the prestige. They're in it because they love Jesus and are called by the Spirit to serve. In addition, they are the kind of men that other men want to emulate. They have a selflessness, a depth, and a substance to their character that lends weight and authority to their leadership."¹

They set the example, and our responsibility is to follow it. The way the New Testament voices that reality is with the word "submission." The chief relational characteristic that God calls for in the life of the Christian is humble submission. Whether that is in marriage (Ephesians 5:21 mutual submission), in parenting (children obey your parents), with the government (go back and re-read Romans 13 and count the shocking number of times we are commanded to submit), our role is humble submission. With our leaders in the church (Hebrews 13 obey your leaders), our following of Elder's example is our act of submission to their authority. In fact, the heart of church membership means submission to that local group of Elders. Uniting with a church is in doctrine, with its people, and under its Elders.

¹ Robert H. Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping A New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), p. 69.

Lest we begin to think that this call for submission is merely an act of power-broking, either by Paul or by church Elders, consider what Paul has already been saying about spiritual leadership and the life he is living. David Garland writes:

“Paul’s request that they imitate him, however, strikes many today as egotistical, but such criticism should dissipate when one traces what he could expect them to imitate. They are to give up their hankering for high status and accept the lowliness that Paul models. They are to welcome being regarded as fools for Christ, and as weak and dishonored. They are to return abuse with blessing, slander with conciliation, and to endure persecution (4:10–13). They are to recognize that all that they are and have comes to them as a grace-gift from God (3:10) and that they are not inherently extraordinary (4:7). They are to think of themselves as no better than menial field hands (3:5) and servants (4:1) awaiting God’s judgment to determine if they were trustworthy (4:5). They are to rid themselves of all resentments and rivalries with co-workers so that they can toil together in God’s field (3:5–9). They are to resist passing themselves off as wise or elite by using lofty words of wisdom or aligning themselves with those who do and to rely instead on the power of God that works through weakness, fear, and trembling (2:1–4).”²

3. CHOICE TO MAKE

While there was a drastic shift in tone in v. 14 to become more loving and paternal, that tone now ramps back up as he closes out the chapter and gets them ready for what is coming in the next several chapters.

1 Corinthians 4:18-21 - ¹⁸ Some of you have become arrogant, thinking I will not visit you again. ¹⁹ But I will come—and soon—if the Lord lets me, and then I’ll find out whether these arrogant people just give pretentious speeches or whether they really have God’s power. ²⁰ For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God’s power. ²¹ Which do you choose? Should I come with a rod to punish you, or should I come with love and a gentle spirit?

By the time Paul writes this letter to them, he has been gone from Corinth for around 5 years. The Corinthians have seemingly drifted from Paul. They are now questioning his authority, his love for them, and as we will find out later in the book, his apostleship. Easy to do when he’s gone.

² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 146–147.

Paul rightly addresses their rebellion as arrogance. The word he uses for arrogance means “puffed up” with empty air, a favorite word of his (6x in 1 Corinthians). They don’t have the courage to confront him face-to-face, so they rise up in his absence, themselves trying to become the authority. These are those people who are kind to your face, or are at least polite in front of you, but then take you to task on social media, or talk bad about you once you’re gone. Paul responds with a direct confrontation and threatens something like a showdown at the Corinthian Corral. Let’s get past the idle words and threats...let’s see who is really living in God’s power, let’s see who is just empty air. Why? God’s Kingdom is not a matter of talk, but one of power. It’s easy to talk a big game...are you living it?

Referencing God’s Kingdom is rare for Paul to do. And I think he does it very much on purpose. Back in v. 8 he sarcastically declared that the Corinthians think so highly of themselves they are “already reigning” in God’s Kingdom. Just one problem with that...it’s GOD’S Kingdom. He is the only one who reigns there. Being a part of God’s Kingdom means submission to His rule and reign. So which will you choose? For you to be in charge, or for God to be in charge? And then from a place of loving authority...do you want me to return to you with punishment or with gentleness?

The language he uses here is the same language he uses to refer to Jesus’ return to the Earth, a return he has already referenced in 4:5. It all comes down to this...Friends, the Lord has ultimate authority, it’s His Kingdom. And he has handed down a measure of that authority to the Elders in the Church as part of his gracious plan for the Church. Our role is humble submission to the Lord, and to those the Lord has placed over us. Why is this important? Because it is the life and health of the Church that is at stake. 1 Corinthians is proof of that fact. The Church is accountable to its leaders, as Paul makes clear here. The Church is ultimately accountable to the Lord in whose Kingdom we live. And the Lord of the Church is going to return to hold us accountable for our faithfulness to him. That can either be a great day for you, or it can be the worst day of your life. Which do you choose?

COMMUNION