

2 Corinthians 10:7-11 Authority, part 1

The Perfect Pastor¹

The perfect pastor preaches the whole counsel of God in exactly 20 minutes every Sunday morning. He condemns sin roundly but never hurts anyone's feelings. He is serious yet humorous, deeply intellectual yet easy to understand.

He works from 8am until midnight every day and never seems tired.

The perfect pastor makes \$400 a week, wears quality clothing, drives a nice car, buys many books, and donates \$300 a week to the church.

He is 36 years old and has 40 years' experience.

He is on the short side of tall, stocky in a thin sort of way, and handsome yet ordinary-looking.

He has a deeply rich, resonant voice which, because it is quietly loud, pleases everyone and is audible even to the hard of hearing.

The perfect pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and he spends most of his time with the senior citizens.

Since he works only on Sundays, he is always available to chat with those who drop by the office or call on the phone.

He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously minded. He's very deep theologically in a simple, child-like way.

He makes 15 home visits a week and is always in his office working diligently on his messages.

The perfect pastor has time for church committee meetings and remains busy evangelizing the unsaved.

Sadly, the perfect pastor burned himself out at the age of 38, quit the ministry, and is now selling insurance.

That's a rather humorous but not too exaggerated list of the common expectations that churches have of their pastors. And when they fail to meet such expectations, church members may become dissatisfied or critical. Something like that apparently happened at the church in Corinth.

Paul and his colleagues had founded the church in Corinth, but it did not take long for the church there to become dissatisfied with Paul. False teachers had infiltrated

¹ This appeared in the *Rochester Courier Journal* in September 1981. Author unknown. Edited slightly, a few statements from other sources.
https://www.frtommylane.com/stories/priesthood/perfect_pastor.htm

the church and were causing havoc within the congregation. In particular, they were questioning Paul's actions, motives, and authority.

In our passage today, we find that Paul is reacting to some of the problems in the church at Corinth. He is likely responding to criticisms against him. Some of the people in the church were complaining about how Paul exercised his authority over the church.

Paul's response to his critics tells us some important things about how to exercise authority in the local church—particularly, how *not* to do it. We find the word “no” or “not” here ten times. We see a series of prohibitions or warning of things not to do—“don't do this, don't do that; don't do it this way.”

What is the proper way to respond to spiritual authority in the local church? Notice what he says here about how *not* to do it.

I. .7 Don't judge by external appearances. Don't be superficial.

A. External appearances are deceiving.

1. Some translations render this as a question—“Do you look...,” while others translate it as a statement—“You are looking...”
2. The word “look” can be translated either as a question, as a statement of fact, or as a command; so it's a matter of interpretation. Many scholars think the proper sense is “You are looking at things outwardly; you are seeing things only on the surface.”
3. The error in view here is judging by appearances, how things look outwardly. The original language has literally “things according to [the] face.” They were judging by external appearances and failing to grasp the true reality of things.

App: External appearances are often deceiving. We don't base our judgments merely on how things look from the outside. We don't evaluate Christian ministry from a worldly viewpoint or human standards—vs. 3 “according to the flesh.” We must use godly, biblical, spiritual discernment and not base our decisions on merely external appearances.

B. .7b External appearances do not necessarily reveal one's true spiritual condition.

What is Paul talking about here?

1. It appears that some in the church were boasting that they were truly “of Christ” (Χριστοῦ) and that Paul was not. In other words, they were saying that Christ had authorized them but had not authorized Paul. They were claiming some kind of special, unique relationship with Christ that Paul did not have.

2 Co 11:13 *For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.*

They claimed to be apostles but were not. They were deceivers and false teachers.

Quote: The issue at stake was not Paul’s status as a genuine Christian but his position as a true apostle with authority.²

2. Paul claims to be “of Christ” just as much as anyone else. He does not deny that anyone else in the church is “of Christ,” but he affirms that he is “of Christ” as well.
3. Paul’s authority as an apostle—someone with a special and distinct relationship with Christ—ought to be obvious to everyone. He was an apostle; his adversaries were not.
4. This was a battle of authority. The false teachers were trying to undermine Paul’s authority in the church so they could take over. They attack and criticize Paul for various supposed weaknesses, all of which were designed to undercut his authority.

Trans: Paul is urging his readers here not to be taken in by these complaints against him. They should not judge by external appearances.

Likewise, we need to be careful not to judge things by human standards. We must think biblically about things and see things as they really are. The church is a spiritual organization, and we have to see things from a spiritual perspective.

² Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 690.

And we must beware when someone claiming spiritual authority bases that authority on having a special or unique relationship to Christ that others don't have. I think we see this today in the Charismatic movement. Preachers claim to receive direct revelation from God, and we are supposed to listen to them because God spoke to them directly. Some even claim the title of apostle, as if they have a special or unique connection to Christ that others don't have.

All Christians have the same access to the same resources in Christ. None of us is an apostle; no one can claim special authority over others due to their special relationship to Christ.

II. .8 Don't deny legitimate authority (ἐξουσία).

A. Authority is God-given—"authority, which the Lord gave us."

1. Paul is an apostle. That means that Christ had appeared to him and authorized him to be a spokesman or representative. That happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. Jesus appeared to Paul several times. So Paul is not "ashamed" about the authority God granted him. He does not want to boast about his authority, but he doesn't deny it either.
2. Today, we no longer have apostles in authority over local churches. What is the authority in the local church? There are several levels of authority within a local church.
 - a) The main and highest authority is Christ himself. The church belongs to the Lord; it's his body, his bride.
 - b) Secondly, a level of authority exists within the congregation itself. Local churches are to be autonomous—i.e., they govern themselves. We practice congregational church government—the members of the church operate the church. So in a certain sense, the congregation itself is the authority for the church.
 - c) But thirdly, local churches engage pastors as their spiritual leaders. The pastor is the shepherd of the flock, the overseer of the operation, and the chief elder of the assembly. His job is to govern the church. He's not a tyrant or a dictator, but he does have the responsibility to provide leadership to the congregation, much like a shepherd guides and protects his sheep.

- d) The pastor serves as the leader as long as the congregation allows him that privilege. As long as the assembly allows the man to occupy the office of pastor, the pastor has the duty to exercise authority over the church.
- e) That's not absolute, apostolic authority, but it is legitimate authority. Under congregational system, the people of the church extend the privilege of leadership to their pastor until they no longer want him as a pastor.
- f) And it's illegitimate and wrong for anyone to undercut proper authority within the church or to take authority if he/she is not entitled to it. That's what these false teachers were trying to do, and it's sadly common within churches today.

What is the purpose of this God-given authority?

- B. .8b Authority is to be used for the church's edification (οικοδομή).
 - 1. Edification is building up. Spiritual authority is never for personal use, but for the building up of the church.

2 Corinthians 13:10 [Paul speaks of] the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction.
 - 2. The pastor is supposed to use his authority over the flock to build up the flock. Like a shepherd, a pastor should want his flock to be strong and in good health. He wants the flock to prosper and grow spiritually. He wants to promote the best interests and well-being of the flock. He wants the church to be mature, stable, and strong.
 - 3. So in his exercise of authority, the pastor oversees the operation of the church so that it grows and maintains good health. Sometimes discipline is necessary for good health, but even that is for the benefit of the flock.
 - 4. The false teachers were doing just the opposite in the church at Corinth. They were not building anything; they were causing confusion and division. Unlike the false teachers, Paul was using his authority for the good of the church. The false teachers were doing just the opposite.

Read 11:20.

App: One of the marks of a good pastor is that he uses his authority for the building up of the church, for the benefit of the people.

One of the marks of a false teacher is that he is a bully or a tyrant; he's not building up the church through his authority, he's tearing it down.

Church members must be discerning to tell whether their spiritual leaders are building up the church or tearing it down.

C. .8b Authority is not to be used to destroy the church.

This language seems to reflect the specific charges against Paul. Some people were complaining that Paul was damaging the church through his authority. The false teachers claimed that Paul was destroying the church. Just the opposite was actually true.

App: It's much easier to destroy something than it is to build it up. What may have taken years to build can come crumbling down very quickly—e.g., the World Trade Centers.

Same with a church or a Christian ministry. If the leaders of a church are not careful, they can easily and quickly destroy or weaken what took years to build. That was the danger there in Corinth because of the presence of the false teachers—everything that Paul had built could easily come tumbling down.

What was he doing that was supposedly so destructive? What are their criticisms?

1. .9 He sent terrifying letters.

a) The word here is based on the root for “fear” (ἐκφοβειν), so “to frighten, to make afraid,” perhaps to intimidate.

b) This probably reflects the fact that Paul had sent the church a “severe” letter to the church previously.

Remember that, on a previous visit, the church had treated him badly, and so he left earlier than he had planned. Then he sent them a “severe” letter that some people did not appreciate; the false teachers accused Paul of “terrifying” the people through this letter.

c) However, the severe letter had good results. The people had repented and changed their ways because of that letter. Paul's intent was not to terrify anyone but to lead the people to repentance.

2. .10 He was weak and unimpressive in person.

- a) He was stern/severe from a distance—sending these terrifying letters—but weak and uninspiring in person.
- b) Regarding Paul’s “bodily presence,” there is no reliable historic tradition informing us as to what Paul looked like. All we know is that the false teachers were not impressed by his appearance—he looked rather feeble and weak.
- c) Further, they complained that Paul’s speech was “contemptible” (ἐξουθενέω). The word means “having little or no weight; negligible; of little value.”

(1) Remember that the Greeks loved to listen to skilled, impressive orators. They expected the political and religious leaders to speak persuasively and eloquently. Powerful people were usually powerful speakers. The Greeks were highly impressed by skilled debaters and orators. Powerful people should be stylish, attractive, and impressive.

(2) Paul freely admits that he was not an eloquent orator. His speaking skills and physical presence made a somewhat unfavorable impression.

Cf. 11:6a—“I am untrained in speech.” Perhaps the highly cultured Greeks did not think much of Paul’s use of the Greek language.

(3) Paul intentionally avoided trying to impress people through his speaking abilities. He did not want to gain a following through his rhetorical skills. If people were going to follow him, he wanted it to be because of the Gospel, not because of persuasive words or skillful speaking.

1 Corinthians 1:17 Christ [sent me] to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

1 Corinthians 2:1–4 ... *when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom ... I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom...*

He intentionally avoided appealing to people on the basis of skilled, impressive oratory or argument. He wanted people to be drawn to Christianity because of the *message*, not the *messenger*.

App: In today's church, people often emphasize oratorical skill over biblical content. They don't care what the content is if the speaker is easy to listen to, humorous, or a good story teller.

We need to focus on the message, much more than the messenger. The content of a message is much more important than the performance of the speaker. If we evaluate someone, it ought to be on the basis of how biblically accurate the person is. What should impress us is biblical accuracy, not speaking skills or personal appearance or performance. E.g., Act 17:11

3. .11 Paul warns that he will be just as stern in person as he is in his letters. Next time he visits, his words will not be insignificant or unimportant. His words and deeds will be weighty and powerful next time he shows up.

Quote: Paul is not the weak, wretched quack his adversaries make him out to be, and the Corinthians should take immediate steps to get their house in order in obedience to his instructions.³

App: Although pastoral authority is not the same as apostolic authority, pastors do speak with weight and power. Or at least, the congregation should recognize the importance of what the pastor is saying when he is proclaiming God's word. When the pastor is exhorting the people in the name of the Lord, his words have significance and strength—not because of the person himself but because he is proclaiming God's word as God's spokesman.

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 449.

We must also have the biblical discernment to know if the preacher is not teaching the Word accurately or properly. I'm always amazed at how huge crowds of people show up to hear false teachers. Some of these mega-church pastors say outrageous, unbiblical things, and it does not seem to make any difference to the audience. People still flock to hear them no matter what crazy, false doctrine they promote.

Pastors sometimes need to use weighty and powerful words. Their goal is to edify the congregation. That might mean that they call out the false teachers and deal sternly with church problems. That's the pastor's job; it's his responsibility.

A church must appreciate and recognize valid spiritual authority, particularly the authority of those tasked with proclaiming the word of God. Sometimes pastors have to confront issues in the church with weighty and powerful words; they have to exercise their God-given authority for the benefit of the church. If they fail to do so, it could result in the destruction or downfall of the church. If Paul had allowed these false teachers to continue to influence the church, the results would have been catastrophic. He had to approach these issues sternly and with authority. That's still appropriate in some cases today.