

2 Corinthians 10

You don't need me to tell you that **Power** and **Authority** are red button issues with huge confusion around them.

For lots of people, power and authority are always suspect and usually harmful.

A lot of people who've only been on the receiving end of authority and seen a lot of abuse of power find anything that sounds like authority in the church makes them want to run a mile.

And yet at the same time we have a strange love of power and authority in some areas – when it's called effectiveness, when it's about the power to keep us safe or well fed or entertained. We'll happily submit to a whole load of rules when those things are threatened. One of the reasons the church is despised is because it seems to have so little power and authority and effectiveness to deliver the stuff everyone really cares about – being safe and fed and entertained.

This chapter is a great shot of truth on what real power and authority are in gospel ministry and how they should be exercised and it's a useful corrective when we're facing a constant draw towards a worldly pattern of power and authority.

What's the issue in Corinth?

² I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. (NIV)

That's the issue – does Paul operate according to the standards of the world? Literally does he *walk according to the flesh* (ESV)? Which seems a bizarre accusation of someone who is so clearly all about walking by the Spirit – probably the least worldly person you could think of after the Lord Jesus.

But look at why some people in Corinth are thinking that:

¹⁰ For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

This is what the opposition are saying. Paul is all bark and no bite. This isn't a Spirit-filled ministry – this is just a man writing pompous, harsh letters – firing out punchy tweets – but when you see him in person he's pathetic.

It could be that they're saying this out of cynicism – they can "see through" Paul's spiritual language and they see an angry writer who is timid and shy when he's speaking in person.

It could be that they're saying this out of charismaticism – they're saying – we're the ones who have a Spirit of power and when we speak it's not like Paul - everyone knows that there's authority and people fall over and roll in the aisles and there's a real work of the Spirit happening.

And I'm tempted to dismiss those arguments against Paul – but then I think – I can judge ministries like that. I can be cynical and just see someone's ministry as a function of their natural personality – that person is always full of joy because they're from this country, that person is a great evangelist because they're an extrovert, that person has got a real gravity to what they say because they've got a deep voice. It's stupid but I can do that.

Or I can judge people's lack of spiritual power. If he was really full of the Spirit he'd sound more like John Piper – there'd be more passion and volume.

But Paul says here – you need to change your thinking. I need to change my thinking.

Chapter 7 the purpose Paul was driving at was heart change – you need to feel differently
Chapters 8 and 9 his purpose he was driving at was behaviour change – flowing out of heart change – but what he was driving at was actually do something – get your cash ready
Chapter 10 the purpose he's driving at is mindshift on the issues of power and authority:

10 By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” toward you when away! ² I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.

1. There is the gentleness of Christ that warns

In chapter 5 Paul had said he was Christ's ambassador – God making his appeal through him – and now he appeals by the humility and gentleness of Christ. That is beautiful isn't it?
Christ is many things and he is all those things maximally and at the same time and two of the things he is is humble and gentle of heart.

That's why he became man and took the position of a servant and humbled himself to death on a Cross.

That's why he runs after sinners, runs after enemies, runs after people who have rejected him again and again and begs them to come into the feast. Why should a king beg? But he does and Paul does here.

Paul's opponents in Corinth had been mistaking Paul's gentleness for timidity but Paul says – no – it's the gentleness of Christ. Don't be surprised if gentleness is mistaken for weakness. Sometimes we might just be being cowardly. But Christ's gentleness was mistaken for weakness and failure and we're supposed to look like him and lead like him. And that will often be misunderstood.

But then Paul goes on to explain that this gentleness is a restraint of power, it's not the absence of power.

² I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.

The reason why Paul's letters are often severe and then his presence is often not severe is because that's how warnings are supposed to work. If the warning works you don't have to be severe.

Paul doesn't want to have to be tough with people in person. The Father does not want to have to discipline his children. Christ does not want to have to discipline his church. He will if he has to but he doesn't want to because he loves them and he'd far rather they are drawn to him willingly.

So he warns – you see that all through the Old Testament – God is so slow to anger – he sends prophet after prophet after prophet for hundreds of years – and some people take that for laxness – like God is never going to judge.

But Paul is clear here – we will be bold and sharp when we come if we need to - but I'd far rather do this by appealing to you now.

Calvin says:

It is the duty of a good pastor to allure his sheep peacefully and kindly, that they may allow themselves to be governed, rather than to constrain them by violence. Severity, it is true, is, I acknowledge, sometimes necessary, but we must always set out with *gentleness*, and persevere in it, so long as the hearer shews himself tractable. Severity must be the last resource. As [far as] we [can we] *draw* men rather than *drive* them.

[However] *when* it is time to act with severity — after we have found, on trial being made, that allurements and mildness have no good effect [we] shall do it... with reluctance... but still ... determine to do it otherwise [then] it will not be moderation, nor [mildness] of temper, but criminal cowardice.

Perks: shot selection. / Flexing your leadership style.¹

Governed by the Gentleness of Christ – lovingly restraining power – wanting to draw people.

2. There is real divine power that demolishes, captures and punishes

³For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power...

Paul's opponents thought there was no real power in Paul's ministry – that it was just bluster and then timidity. But Paul says there is real power operating – to demolish, capture and punish

they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. ⁶And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience,

The demolition is of strongholds – which is then explained as 'arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God' – So he doesn't demolish people. Doesn't pull down people. You see that even in this passage where he's challenging his opponents but he's extremely restrained about what he says about them – he attacks their arguments – their philosophy of ministry. He attacks the wisdom of the world. And how does he do that – well you see all through his letters – he does that with the gospel – that makes destroys the wisdom of the wise, that overpowers human strength through the weak word of the Cross.

And there's power to capture – every thought to make it obedient to Christ. Again you see Paul doing this in his letters and he presumably did it in his face-to-face ministry too. He takes a thought like wisdom or power or glory – and he doesn't just destroy it – he shows how it is fulfilled in Christ. He brings it into alignment with Christ.

This is a verse that is often used either in relation to personal piety (take captive every thought that does through your head) or in theories of apologetics and cultural engagement (examine worldviews and show how they are subversively fulfilled in Christ). But the context here is Paul's ministry to the Corinthian church. There's certainly an evangelistic edge to it – as there always is even when Paul's writing to the church – but this is particularly about capturing ideas in the church and bending them to obedience to Christ.

So e.g. – the idea floating around your church that we should be a community – that's right but the idea is undefined – it means different things to different people – for some people it means that we shouldn't worry too much about evangelism we just need to concentrate on loving one another by which we actually mean being loved and comfortable. So we need to capture that idea and say – Yes community – but gospel shaped community is going to be uncomfortable and outward-looking. E.g. the idea floating around your church that we should be of being doctrinally sound – that's right but what we don't want is doctrine for the sake of it or doctrine so that we can look down on other churches or doctrine expressed in churchy language or doctrine that has somehow lost connection

¹ <https://londonplantingacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situational-Leadership.pdf>.

with a first love for Christ himself. So we capture that idea and say – Yes doctrine – but doctrine that is about obedience to Christ.
And there's power to punish:

⁶And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

Part of this is simply that punishment flows out of proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus says:

¹⁶“Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me.” (Luke 10:16)

If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:23)

When we simply proclaim the gospel we are saying that if you reject this the wrath of God remains on you.

But there's also an implication of actual church discipline here – which is an enactment on earth of that divine judgment.

Paul has clearly had people put outside the church into the realm of Satan before. And he's willing to do that again.

(A church planter in North London I've got to know who's plant failed – got plenty of people but there was no distinction between church and outsiders and it was chaos – house full of drunk people partying thinking this was church and he had to close it down – he'll tell anyone who listens – he wishes he had thought through church discipline and membership and all those issues.)

But then notice end of verse 6 - as soon as he's said that he follows up with **“your obedience is complete.”** Which seems to be saying something like 'But in your case I'm sure of better things.'

The point of all this is that there is divine power in Paul's gospel ministry to bring thoughts and people to obedience to Christ.

The opponents couldn't see that. It didn't look like a powerful ministry.

It was about reasoning from the Scriptures about Christ.

It was about the weak word of the Cross.

It was about prayer that the Word would penetrate.

So it doesn't look powerful.

The opponents say “his speaking amounts to nothing” – but they're wrong – it does amount to something.

It was about simple words but backed up by massive divine power.

If that's your ministry – be encouraged.

There's real power and...

3. There is real authority from Christ to build up

⁸So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

Paul's opponents were saying, Paul goes on about his authority as an apostle – but he's just trying to frighten you – it's a power play. There's no real authority there.

But Paul says there is real authority in his ministry and there are 2 aspects to that – 2 marks of true authority – from Christ and it's for building up:

- From Christ – Vanhoozer “Biblical authority after babel” – only read half a chapter – but got the point **authority is authorisation**. It is derivative from God's authority – we don't really have any authority in ourselves – it is from the Lord for a particular purpose – we are authorised in certain ways with certain limits. So the authority of the pastor is no less and no more than as it is given by Christ. No less in that this is the authority of Christ. That is massive authority. But no more in the sense that it has to be in accordance with Christ's written authorisation – the Word of God. If we try to bind people's conscience with something that is not in the Bible that is illegitimate. But if we direct people to do what Christ has said and pastor them in the way he has said we have the whole authority of heaven behind that.
- For building up – this is so helpful – in showing people that authority is not an intrinsically harmful, abusive thing. A Kenyan pastor friend used to love quoting 2 Sam 23:

'When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
⁴ he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.'

Authority exercised rightly brings blessing. That's Christ's rule. That's all true authority.

Wouldn't it be great to see that modelled in homes and churches – an authority that brings light and refreshment and builds people up.

A practical example of that would be setting up a structure in your church so that people are Engaged and Evangelised and Established and Equipped. To do that is going to involve an exercise of authority. But you're doing that – not because you've read it in the Trellis and the Vine – but because it's in the Bible and that will build people up.

There is real authority from Christ to build up – don't be ashamed of that.

4. There is the limit of a God-given field of gospel labour

This is v 12 to the end of the chp – and notice all the language of measure and limits.

¹² We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. ¹³ We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. ¹⁴ We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. ¹⁵ Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, ¹⁶ so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else's territory.

The point is that power and authority are only to be exercised within particular limits. We've already talked about the fact that it needs to be limited by the authorisation of the Word of Christ. And here Paul adds that it is also limited by the sphere of service that he has been given by God.

So again there's the idea that authority is derivative but also here that it's tied to gospel labour.

¹⁴We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ.

Paul's gospel labour amongst them gives him the right to boast in them and implicitly also the right to get involved in their lives, the right to warn them and correct them and rebuke them and discipline them. In some ways he has that right anyway as an apostle. But this is the extra right. This is why he's not walking away from this church despite all their problems. This is why he's jealous for them with a parental jealousy – because he was the one who brought them to life, he and his co-workers laboured over them for 18 months, preaching and teaching them. And that labour and the quality of that gospel labour is the basis of his sphere of service.

Simple application – stick to pastoring our own church – first and foremost labour at preaching Christ there and devote ourselves to those people – tie ourselves to them and we do win the right to speak to them in a deep and direct way.

And that will lead outward in mission.

¹⁵Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. [Narrow focus] Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, ¹⁶so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. [Broad fruit]

So not getting distracted or ambitious in getting involved in other people's fields and yet not an endless inward-focus because that gospel ministry will grow a mission minded church that will want to be sending people out and reaching the nations.

Let's pray for a ministry that would have this sort of power.

¹⁷But, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." ¹⁸For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.