

YOUR AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

You must teach these things and encourage the believers to do them. You have the authority to correct them when necessary, so don't let anyone disregard what you say. – Titus 2:15

Your Authority

Leadership experts talk about two kinds of authority: “positional authority,” and “personal authority,” sometimes called “moral authority.”

Positional authority is the authority you have to make decisions or demand obedience because of the position you hold. In other words, people do what you say because you're the pastor. Different systems of church government give pastors different amounts of positional authority.

In some systems, if you are the pastor, you have the final say on every decision, without consulting anyone except God. In other systems you work together with a designated body of church leaders to discern God's direction. In some systems the pastor is given authority over a specific area such as worship or preaching, and a body of church leaders decides everything else. And in some systems the pastor is little more than an employee who is expected to submit to the direction of the church leaders in all points. In a

later section we will look at different ways decisions are made in different church systems. For now, **it is important that you and your people are agreed about the amount of positional authority the pastor carries.**

Regardless of how your church is organized, **your real authority to influence and direct people comes from their perception of you as a person.** This is true to some extent in any organization, but especially so in voluntary organizations like a church, where if people don't respect you, they are free to leave.

Notice that I said "respect," not "like." People will grant you authority in their lives based on how they perceive your character, your relationship with God, your relationship with them and their friends, and your knowledge and ability. The more respect you earn, the more influence and authority you will have.

Making changes

Your influence and authority will be put to the test when you feel God leading you to change something. Some people see the smallest change as a major issue.

One woman came up to me after a worship service and said, "Pastor, you've changed everything!"

"I have?" I asked. "How?"

"The offering used to be after the sermon, and today it was before!"

Change makes most people uncomfortable. If you feel God is leading your church in a new direction, there are several things you can do to make it easier on everyone.

1. First and foremost, **cover the whole process in prayer.**
2. **Informally discuss** the idea with someone who shares your vision for the congregation, and let them begin planting seeds in conversation with others.
3. Use sermons to **lay the groundwork** for change. Usually this does not mean proclaiming, "God told me he wants us to do this," although if God leads you to do it that way, go for it! More often it is better to use your sermons

to show that your new direction is Biblical and timely. (If you can't support your idea from the Bible, you should re-examine whether it really came from God.)

4. At the right time, **present your idea** as an action proposal. The ideal is if your preaching leads others to suggest the same idea God gave you, but be ready to suggest it yourself if you need to. If possible, present it as something you're going to try for a while to see if it works, rather than as a permanent change.

5. **Expect resistance** to anything that is “not the way we've always done it,” especially if you are not the founding pastor of the congregation.

6. **Know the stages of acceptance.** With every change, some people will be excited from the beginning, most will gradually come on board, and some will hold out until success is proven. Some may never accept it, and some may even leave the church. Prepare yourself and your leaders for that eventuality.

7. Finally, **remember that you can't force the church** to accept a change, even if it is from God. There are many sad examples of congregations using their God-given free will to refuse to accept God's new idea. That refusal often marked the beginning of decline for the church. If that happens to you, don't feel like a failure; even Jesus couldn't get most of the Pharisees to change their ways.

Sharing leadership

Sharing responsibilities in a leadership team is a good thing. Everyone has different strengths and passions. What may be drudgery for one person is a pleasure for someone else. This kind of shared leadership is valuable and important. I'll talk more about how to make it work in Part 3.

Some churches attempt to carry this idea to what I consider an unworkable extreme: two or more pastors with equal authority, with all decisions made by consensus. This sounds good in theory, but I've never seen it work well in practice. Inevitably something comes up where, for whatever reason, the leaders can't agree. What then? Sometimes “wait” or “do nothing” are not viable options.

Some people are just better leaders than others. No matter what the ideal says, the church folks are going to tend to follow one of the “equal leaders” more than the others. Or half the congregation will look to one pastor for leadership, and the other half to the other pastor. When a no-consensus situation arises, this divided loyalty can split the church.

The Bible has no example of successful shared leadership. When Paul and Barnabas tried it, they wound up splitting and going separate ways (Acts 15:36-40). Even the twelve apostles didn’t share leadership equally. When a tough decision had to be made they looked to James (see Acts 15:6-21). There was always one person clearly in charge.

I’m not saying a church can’t have more than one pastor. But **when you are one of several pastors or leaders, the different areas of responsibility must be carefully spelled out, preferably in writing.** You all must avoid trespassing on each other’s roles, and there must be a clear, agreed-upon method for settling disagreements.

Your Accountability

Ultimately, as with all Christians, pastors are accountable to God. But **you’ll avoid a lot of problems if you also have some clear line of accountability to people.** Some pastors claim that they are responsible only to God, and that they are the only ones who can properly hear from God. That is a recipe for trouble.

No one in the New Testament church claimed to hear infallibly from God. Rather, Paul tells us *we know in part, and we prophesy in part* (1 Corinthians 13:9 ESV). **Those who believe they are hearing from God should submit what they are hearing to others for verification** (1 Corinthians 14:29). Pastors are not exempt from this requirement.

Perhaps the biggest question that faced the New Testament church was the question of whether pagans were required to follow the Jewish law in order to become Christians. Acts 15 describes how it was settled. Peter, Paul, James and several other apostles and elders were there, including several whom God used to write the Bible. Yet none of them stood up and said, “You

have to do it this way because I'm an apostle and I say so." No one said, "You have to do it this way because God told me." Instead, they talked, prayed and reasoned together, and together they reached a decision.

This doesn't mean you put all your decisions to a majority vote. You may decide God wants you to go ahead with something despite counsel to the contrary, as Paul did in Acts 21:10-14. But it does mean you should give serious prayerful consideration if Christians you respect believe you are hearing God wrong.

A clear line of accountability protects you as well as the church. In some churches, if you are the pastor, that means you handle the church's money. Or if you are counseling a young woman, you may be the first man to ever treat her with gentleness and compassion, and this may lead her to develop romantic feelings toward you. Pastors are human beings, and these temptations can be very strong. Knowing that someone will be holding you accountable, checking the financial records or asking about your relationships, can be a powerful help in resisting temptation.

Suppose you have done nothing wrong, but some suspicious or ill-intentioned person says you did. Later on we'll look at some practical ways to minimize the risk of such temptations and accusations. Even with the best systems in place, though, you can still be accused. An accountability system should have a clearly delineated process for dealing with such accusations, to protect you and to protect the church. This should include some way for knowledgeable, objective outsiders to investigate the allegations with such obvious integrity that reasonable people will accept their findings.

If there was actual wrongdoing, it is important that the church have a means of dealing with it. The church needs to be protected and healed, and the pastor needs to be disciplined and, if possible, rehabilitated (2 Corinthians 2:5-8). If the church does not fulfill its responsibilities in this area, often the only recourse is to the legal system of the nation. This invites the state to get involved in the internal affairs of the church. In my opinion this is never a good thing. It is much preferable if the church has an accountability system which can deal effectively with the situation (1 Corinthians 6:1-7).

What does that earthly accountability look like for you, the pastor? It

depends on the system of church government your church follows. If you are in a system where the congregation chose or hired you, you are accountable to the congregation or its leadership body. If there is a bishop or presbytery or similar person or group in authority, you are accountable to them.

Every pastor needs someone who can hold them accountable beyond the people of their own congregation, even if there is not an official accountability channel. In certain cultures, or if you are the founding pastor of a church, positional authority can be very strong. The members may not feel they are able to confront you with unpleasant truths, even if you need to hear them. For your own spiritual protection, find or form a group of pastors who can hold each other accountable.

Points to Remember

- Being pastor gives you some authority, but being respected as a person gives you much more.
- Use your authority wisely, especially when you are changing things.
- Where there is shared authority, be sure everyone is clear about how that works.
- Clear lines of accountability protect you as well as the church.
- It is good to have someone beyond your own congregation who can hold you accountable.