



Chapter 8 Handling Disputes in the Fellowship

We have touched on this theme in previous chapters, but it is sufficiently important to dedicate an entire chapter to. How are leadership to handle those who don't agree or see things the same way as the leadership do? What is to be the pastoral attitude as regards those who have strongly differing viewpoints?

Let's take as our key passages the following Scriptures to build the divine viewpoint on this area:

John 13:34 (NKJV) "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Col 3:14 (NKJV) But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

2 Tim 2:24 (NKJV) And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, 25 in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

1 Pet 1:22 (NKJV) Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart,

1 Pet 4:8 (NKJV) And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

Leadership Demands Evident Love

From these passages it is very clear that all believers, but especially leaders, are to handle themselves in such a way that those being led know that it is being done in love. It is not enough for a leader to tell himself that he loves his flock and that is why he is saying or doing something. It must be evident to the flock that they are loved, otherwise disharmony and wounding will take place. There is a great tendency to use harshness out of a desire to protect the flock from error, but in the final analysis this is nothing more than a smoke screen for impatience or an inflated ego that can't tolerate being opposed.

A leader cannot afford to tolerate in him or herself a lack of empathy. To explain it away by saying "*It is just not a part of my personality or temperament,*" is not a sufficient answer to the concern. When we say we lack empathy, what we really need to hear ourselves saying is that we lack the willingness to feel the infirmities of our people. Shepherding must have as one of its great hallmarks, the ability to identify with the feelings of the people's infirmities.

I love the way King James translators translated the writer of the book of Hebrews when it says:

Hebrews 4:15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the *feeling of our infirmities*; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

This is Jesus we are reading about here. He Who is the Chief Shepherd of our souls. If this is how He relates to us, then we who lead must believe Him for a similar grace and heart to be manifested through our ministries to His sheep.

If those in leadership fail to properly evaluate their position of humble equality with their flock they will subconsciously begin to lose sensitivity for the things they say and do. Only as leaders consciously remember that their leadership is not a license to dictate or Lord it over their people will they maintain a spirit of love and service towards their people.

Leadership requires Humility

Probably the greatest enemy of a loving leadership is the failure to properly understand their position in relation to their flock. The leader must never allow himself to think that he is above, in terms of value, intelligence, spirituality, or necessarily even wisdom, those he leads. Because leadership in the kingdom of God is to be equated with servanthood, maintaining a humble, gentle, and kind approach to every dealing in the Church is essential. There is absolutely no place for harshness. At times members of the flock may make foolish choices, and cause the leadership a degree of challenge and stress to resolve, but if the leadership think of themselves as parents of small children and expect the kind of respect and absolute obedience that they would from their children then such expectation will lead to a domineering leadership style and ultimately offenses in the body.

The form of leadership the apostles established was a non-hierarchical style. Every move the leadership of Churches made, after the time of the apostles, towards hierarchical leadership, has led the Church further and further away from the type of leadership Jesus called for in His Church.

A defensive and arrogant posture in leadership will always cause the flock to back away from their Shepherd, fearing encounters. The leader who laments that his people just won't come to him about the problems they have with his leadership, or other problems in the Church, would do well to ask themselves if their arrogant and defensive posture may well be the cause of their reticence.

If leadership will look at their leadership style and attitudes properly these challenges to their authority or vision won't create a great deal of tension. It is when leaders think of their Churches like CEOs think of their corporations, that problems arise. If I tell myself that I have to get my congregation to do what I want them to do so that the vision we are trying to accomplish can be completed, then I have set myself up to feel the need to push my people to do what I want them to do. This must not happen. Churches are not corporations, visions don't have to be completed in any particular time frame. It is better to go slowly and patiently so as to not offend the congregation, than to tell myself that everything has to stay on schedule and end up pushing to keep it so. The organized Church has so long accepted the notion that the Senior Pastor was some sort of spiritual boss in a heavenly corporation that they allow their pastors to act as though such a notion was truly germane to true Church leadership, and have allowed them to boss the congregation around. It reminds me of the IRS. When they were first established they were set up as an agency to receive the "voluntary" contributions of the citizenry, towards the improvement of the country. But, as time has gone by they have grown to think of themselves as something entirely different than the constitution allowed for, and exercise an abusive authority that they have no right to claim. As we have previously indicated the role of the shepherds has far less to do with authority and far more to do with gentle servanthood.

The majority of Americans believe they "have" to pay income taxes on their personal income. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the Supreme Court has addressed this matter two times,

and on both occasions have never ratified any law regarding personal income tax. They recognize it is unconstitutional. If you ask the IRS what law they use to require American citizens to pay personal income tax, they will not and can not produce such a law because no such law exists. So why do people pay taxes? Because they are either ignorant, or too afraid to confront the IRS in tax court. In most cases that fear is well taken. It is not easy to win in tax court. A great many judges won't even entertain a full hearing on such issues. Most have been bought off by the government. It doesn't change the fact...such tax is illegal, and Americans don't have to pay it. We just grow used to abusive government, and feel it isn't worth the hassle challenging them. The very same thing is true of hierarchical Church leadership. Absolutely nothing in the New Testament supports it, but you'll find millions of believers, throughout the earth, who are convinced it does.

Church is more than Projects

Church is not to be a place where people come and feel that the leadership have an agenda for their lives. The only place I can think of, that has spawned this kind of thinking, is corporate America. The New Testament just simply does not describe the gathering of the saints as a place where great projects are tackled and congregations funneled into the role of tackling such projects. This isn't to say that local Churches shouldn't attempt the completion of projects, but the process of the completing of the project is just as important as the completion itself. If the people feel hustled and pushed, then even if the project gets done, the overall experience of the Church will have been negative and the completion will have lost its sweetness. This is where I find so many of the great controversies of daily Church life. They aren't usually over major doctrinal issues, as much as the plans and ideas of where the Church should go.

Controversies will make or break you, Watch out for Gray Theology

What is the place of handling doctrinal controversies? Again, the leadership are to walk carefully through this, because the temptation is to take gray areas of theology and make them black just because they are pet doctrines or opinions of the leadership. Leaders do not have the right to take gray areas and, through dogmatism, express them as though they were undisputed truth. Over the years I have seen this cause such controversy in the body of Christ. This results from arrogance and a miss perception of the role of the shepherd. If the shepherd believes he has the right to draw lines in the gray areas of life and then communicate them to his flock as though they were divine mandates he is in violation of his role and authority, and shouldn't be surprised that this behavior and thinking causes controversies.

Let's say it boldly and clearly right here: Who cares what a shepherd thinks is important in the gray areas of life? If he shares them as a matter of non-emotional personal opinion that he lives by, then so be it, but when he lays them on his congregation, drawing strength for their adherence from his position, then he has violated his position and authority. At least he would be hard pressed to derive biblical support for his dogmatism.

I have watched shepherds strongly express their beliefs in the gray areas of life, and I have done it myself, with the result of hurt feelings for some, and guilt for others who want to obey their shepherd but aren't going to be brought under the legalism that he lives by. It just isn't worth it. If I use my position to gain support for my personal opinions then I have violated my authority.

I have watched and heard of shepherds drawing such lines as to whether believers should go to movie theaters, drink alcoholic beverages, women being told they should always wear dresses to Church, and men wear ties, men shouldn't wear beards, PG or R rate movies, women shouldn't wear

jewelry, prohibitions against mixed bathing at beaches or swimming pools, rock music, rap music, dancing, manifestations of the Spirit etc. These only serve to create an atmosphere of legalism and being controlled. They stifle the freedom of each believer to walk in the grace of God and determine these areas for themselves.

To use rock music as a classic example; I vividly remember the early 80's, where the Church was so stressed over the issue of Christian rock music. Self proclaimed experts in music came out with strong declarations that certain styles of music were demonic by their very nature, rhythm, syncopation, and style. Believer's were warned to stay away from it because of the danger of it spawning rebellions and immorality. No one ever questioned that some lyrics and the visual and attitudinal presentation of some bands were clearly sinful. It was taken to the point of declaring certain beats as being of the devil. These extremes were watched by our young people, who in turn decided the Church had no relevance to their lives and decided to walk away from such ridiculous legalism. What did we gain? Rebellion! What were we trying to avoid? Rebellion! How did we do? Not too good in many cases. What have we learned? The Church traditionally loses 80% of its young people to the world and the devil. The beat was not satanic. Christ has used rock music in powerful ways to draw millions of young people to the gospel. Much of current worship music employs a rock beat. Yet Church leadership, self impressed with their own opinions, made such a big deal out of it that they called the work of the Spirit - demonic, and drove thousands of young people out of their Churches and back into the world. Now this is sad, and this clearly points out the danger of handling controversies in a grace oriented manner. Don't make gray areas black, and watch out for dogmatizing personal opinion or preference.

Control creates Catastrophe

Church is not to be a place of control. This is perhaps the most poignant of controversial issues. Shepherd's are not allowed, called to, mandated to, permitted, etc., to control their flocks personal lives, nor even their corporate lives. The controls put upon the flock, when they enter the doors of the local Church, are to be minimal. A shepherd's comfort zone for behavior or dress is not to become the boundaries of what he will allow in the gathering of the saints. I may not like certain styles of clothing, or music, but if I control these areas very tightly I run the risk of violating the freedom of each believer in walking according to the dictates of their own consciences. We don't do Christians a favor by taking choice away from them. We may tell ourselves that we have lived longer and know better than they do, but when we attempt to coerce, mandate, or intimidate our people into adopting our personal preferences for behavior or lifestyle, we have stepped over the boundaries of each believer's personal responsibility to sort out those things for themselves before God.

Now, what about such things that the shepherd is deeply checked in his spirit about? Things which he is convinced, that if they take place within the gatherings, he has supported, either by his silence or his permission, a behavior that will lead to the hurt of the people. These are not easy to speak to, because the overseer does have the responsibility to oversee, and a part of that will at times require him to strongly express his concern for certain activities that he has no question will endanger the flock. The problem we face here is that while no one would want to take this responsibility away from the shepherd, at the same time, if this responsibility becomes too liberal in its application, then control has been established in areas where it begins to lend more to legalism than true protection. Because of this, decisions of control should be a matter of serious discussion amongst the leadership of the Church, as well as amongst the flock. The entire issue of control should always be viewed as very dangerous and very suspect of abuse of authority, based on personal preference.

I do not believe that the shepherd should ever be allowed to mandate his personal preference in any given area that does not have clear and unanimous support by the rest of his leadership team and congregation. If he can't gain support there, without coercion or intimidation, then it is not time to make it a Church standard. If a shepherd leads the Church along with other shepherds, then he has a moral obligation and mandate of wisdom to honor them with a full and respected discussion of his concern, before he expresses anything like a gathering standard. If he hopes to have the respect and support of his leadership team, and to quell problems in the congregation, he must understand the importance of respecting their opinion. Failure to do so will almost surely cause disunity and disruption of the Spirit of unity and the bond of peace. Because of this the shepherd must be extremely careful that he not bully, through his personal opinion, the congregation. I will take up the issues of the authority of the shepherd in the next chapter, suffice it to say here that it is clearly a limited authority, even within the context of the leadership team.

Doctrine & Emotion are Inseparable

When it comes to handling doctrinal controversies, either directly affecting a given local Church, or that which is facing the Church universal, the leadership must handle these matters with the greatest of sensitivity. People do not embrace doctrines in a purely intellectual way, which can easily be adjusted by clear teaching. In most cases doctrines are embraced as much within the emotions as with the mind. Extreme sensitivity must be manifested when attempting to help the flock to sort out true from false doctrine.

Some of the leading doctrinal issues in the last 10 years have been such doctrines as, *“The believer and demon possession”*, *“The Prosperity & Healing Message”*, *“The Believer and Discipleship”*, *“The Kingdom and the State”*, *“The Gifts of the Spirit”*, *“The Believer's approach to Music & Worship”*, *“The Believer and Psychotherapy”*, *“The Believer and Inner Healing”*, and *“The Manifestations of the Holy Spirit.”* Each of these have caused the Church no small challenges in addressing. But the methodology of handling these issues is as important as the actual conclusion of belief.

Inevitably, within each congregation, there will be some who see it one way and others who will see it another. Clear, gentle, and sensitive teaching needs to surround the addressing of these issues. If the leadership come thundering their own personal opinions, without solid and clear exposition of the Scriptures, the people will polarize to what their emotions embrace, over the objective teaching of the Word of God. If the leader will handle the doctrine in as unemotional a manner as possible, the people will reflect his emotional stability and think objectively through the issues. If he storms into the pulpit and declares, *“This is how its going to be in this Church, as long as I am pastor,”* then he is either soon to be leaving, or some of his people are. This usually depends on who has been there the longest.

Pastoral leadership must enjoy teaching and researching the Word of God to help their flocks. If they don't, inevitably they will use emotional appeal and human opinion, which is an ethically corrupt methodology for solving critical issues facing the Church. Depending on the impact the doctrine is having on the Church, the leadership should take plenty of time to thoroughly discuss the matter. Ultimate declarations of how their Church is going to settle on the issues should be disbanded altogether. The flock must be given sufficient time to digest the information and watch the results of those who have embraced the popular opinion on the particular doctrine. I have found, over the years, that generally if enough time is given the doctrine will die down, the extremes will become self evident and the leadership won't have had to divide their Church needlessly over the matter. Don't be in a big hurry. I have also noticed that usually, in each new doctrinal thrust, the Holy Spirit is attempting to put the spotlight on some aspect of truth that has been ignored for a

period of time. If that kernel of truth can be magnified, and let the extremes be down-played, then the Church can benefit by a close look at each new doctrinal issue that surfaces.

Always, no matter what the controversial issue, the leadership have the responsibility to communicate the love of God in a loving, non-threatening, non-controlling, servant posture. If the people learn that their leadership don't take their authority too seriously and take their commitment to servant love very seriously, then the authority of love and example will go much further towards stability and life in the Church than if the leadership over extend their authority in controlling ways.