*Authority in Community:* The Biblical Dimensions of Authority within a Pentecostal Community

## Introduction

This appendix augments the 2010 position paper “A Biblical and Theological Study of Authority”[[1]](#footnote-2) by considering how a biblical and Pentecostal perspective on Christian community shapes our view on the nature and proper use of authority. The early church, like the Roman world of which it was a part, was group-oriented rather than individualistic. Within the New Testament, this orientation underlies the description of believers as the body of Christ. Within the teaching of Jesus, salvation is often expressed as a change of social status or group identity (with an emphasis on transformation from shame to honour), and sin is often defined socially as mistreatment of others. It is appropriate, then, to consider the ramifications of biblical truth about authority and power within a collective dynamic.

Our challenge is to reflect on how our collective being-in-Christ informs the use of authority and power in Pentecostal contexts without ignoring the interests of each individual. Such a community-oriented approach is traditional for Pentecostals, since our belief that Spirit-empowerment and spiritual gifts are for all predisposes us to think about community dynamics when we consider how power is shared and administered.

Thus, while we affirm the verticality of divine authority and our submission to Christ as head of the body of Christ, we consider here how all other authority functions laterally within the body. Our particular concern is to safeguard against abuse by those in authority; however, those in authority may also be abused. In what follows, we comment on the following elements of authority in a Pentecostal community: 1) authority administered in a hospitable community promotes the well-being of all, especially those who are the most vulnerable; 2) authority in a spiritually-gifted community recognizes that gifts are distributed throughout the body and promote the contributions of all; 3) authority in an honouring community considers the social aspects of salvation and the use of authority to bring honour to Christ by honouring one another; and 4) authority in the body of Christ invites a consideration of the interdependence of leaders and followers and puts a premium on mutual submission rather than hierarchy.

In sum, how we treat one another is how we witness to each other and to the world that we belong to Jesus.

## Authority in a hospitable community

In salvation, the individual is invited into the community of Christ, where all are equally welcome and made one in Christ (Gal 3:28–29; Rom 10:12–13; Col 3:11). Yet in this hospitable community, there is a special concern to care for the most vulnerable. This follows the pattern of God, who shows no partiality, and yet executes justice for the vulnerable, calling us to do likewise in obedience and fear of the Lord (Deut 10:12–20). We take care of the vulnerable because God cares for and delivers them (Ps 41:1), and as we care for the least of these, we serve God (Matt 25:31–46).

Jesus embodied this as the one who was to come from the branch of David, a shepherd who would do what is just and right (Jer 23:5), one who would be anointed by the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor, and freedom for the captives (Isa 61:1–2). In fulfilling this (Lk 4:18–21), Jesus inaugurated a new humanity marked by hospitality, care, and love. All are welcome, but being part of this community means a responsibility to one another in kindness and humility, bearing with one another in love (Col 3:12–15). This love is to be our witness to the world (Jn 13:34–35).

While all are called to care for the most vulnerable, a special burden is placed on those in leadership. The people pray this ideal for the king in Psalm 72:1–4: “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. …May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Because of the authority given those in leadership, God demands that they do right by those who are afflicted (Jer 22:1; Ps 82:2–4) and pronounces woe on leaders who fail God’s people in this way (Jer 22:13–17; 23:1–2). Therefore, the proper use of authority protects and cares for the vulnerable, serving as our witness to the world.

## Authority in a spiritually gifted community

In a spiritually gifted community, the analogy of the body given in 1 Corinthians 12 guides how it should function. The position paper on authority starts with God as the source of authority and recognizes the Holy Spirit’s freedom to distribute spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11). Gifts are intended to be exercised “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7) and with an appreciation that we need one another’s gifts (1 Cor 12:21-26).

How is authority, defined in the position paper as “*legitimate right* to exercise power,” applied given the diversity of gifts? Using the body analogy, a gift should be exercised when needed. A foot is used when we need to walk. Similarly, the gift of healing is used when addressing sickness. Conversely when use of a gift is withheld (e.g., failure to be hospitable), common good suffers. The position paper highlights an important principle for the exercise of diverse gifts in a body: “Whatever spiritual authority may be exercised between individuals, it must not diminish the authority of Christ in each individual believer.”

Is there a default overall authoritative gift? The position paper explains that Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians that “God has placed in the church *first of all apostles*” is not sufficient to conclude that apostles have prime authority, given how Paul orders spiritual gifts differently in other places (e.g., Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-11). Again, the body analogy demonstrates that authority emerges with the gift that is appropriate for the task or time. We need our ears most when sitting in a concert hall, while our feet can take a break. Similarly, we need teachers when explaining Scripture. No persistent authority is exercised by a person with one particular gift. Rather, the gifts are used when needed in leadership and emphasis. Therefore, authority in a spiritually gifted community recognizes that gifts are distributed throughout the body and promote the contributions of all.

## Authority in an honouring community

In the body of Christ, those with authority should seek to honour those around them. Honour is significant in the Bible. Socially, both Old and New Testaments come from honour-shame cultures. Unlike the modern West that esteems the “self-made” individual, in ancient societies, honour is less earned than derived by one’s predetermined social status or is granted by someone of higher status. Consequently, competition was fierce for favour from higher-status people or systems.

Israel spent most of its history under occupation or in exile; Christianity emerged under Roman rule and its followers were outcast from established Jewish authorities. As subcultures, both groups carefully authorised distinct honour-shame values to form clear identity boundaries that competed with the honour-shame values of the dominant societies. Thus, Israel derived status as a people “chosen” by God (Deut 7:6), with honour-shame behaviours prescribed by divine Law to distinguish them from “the nations” (Gentiles) and the promise of eschatological honour when all nations will be blessed through them (Gen 12:2-3; Isa 2:2). Christians found status as a “family” defined by obedience to God and Christ (Mark 3:35; Matt 5-7), adoption as the children of God (Rom 8:15-17; Jn 1:12), indiscriminate membership from all social strata (e.g., women, children, poor, slaves, infirm—Luke 14:13, 21; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:21-6:9), and discontinuity with Roman values and civic activities (1 Cor 6:9-11; Col 3.7-11).

In Christian community, “honour” is to be ascribed to those within the group (Rom 12:10) and outside of it (Rom 13:7; 1 Pet 2:17). Authority within the church should promote the honour of all as a way of honouring Christ. Although honour was conceived in the ancient world as a limited good, which could be lost in a competitive environment, honour is available to all in Christian community. The bestowal of honour upon one should not be at the expense of shame placed on another; to lift one up is not to put another down.

Ultimately, all authority and honour are eschatological, when God is “all in all,” and at the resurrection what was sown in dishonour will be raised in honour (1 Cor 15:28, 43). As we await Christ’s return, we use authority to bring honour to Christ by honouring one another.

## Authority in the mutuality of *leaders and followers*

As in a family, so in the family of God, a commitment to sacrificial love and mutual submission is the ideal (Eph 5:21-32). This mutuality leads to acknowledging the gifts and value of others. Thus, the equipping gifts of Ephesians 4:11 are recognized for the authorized purpose they have, namely “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (v. 12-13). They are best exercised not as one clinging to position but as a family member exercising their calling in mutual submission to the rest of the family. We do not withhold our gifts and callings from the Church, nor do we lord it over others (Matt 20:25, 1 Pet 5:3). As the authority in a human family is relativized by our allegiance to the family of God, so our authority structures in the Church are relativized by the ultimate authority of God.

Mutual inter-dependency and respect are critical for missional success. In the New Testament, mission is accomplished in community, and all members, whether rich or poor, male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile (Gal 3:28) are acknowledged for their contribution to the mission.

Within the context of mutuality for missional success, Acts 15 provides the classic example of authority being exercised in a community of discernment. The appropriate and “appointed” authoritative leadership was gathered with “the apostles and elders” along with “some other believers” (v. 2). Since there was freedom to speak and to communicate convictions, there was “much discussion” (v. 7). This led to an exercise of triadic discernment: Word, experience/tradition, and Spirit (Acts 15:6-21). They concluded that their decision “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v. 28), and their missional conviction led them to conclude that “we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v. 19). Such clarity arose only in a context of respect and honour for one another under the authority of the Triune God. This example of authority in the body of Christ demonstrates the interdependence of leaders and followers and puts a premium on mutual submission rather than hierarchy.

1. <https://paoc.org/docs/default-source/church-toolbox/position-papers/authority/authority.pdf?sfvrsn=586f196a_2> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)