

*What Do
I Do*



About My
CONVICTIONS?

As always, if we can help you in any way, please contact the church
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What to do about “My Convictions”

A Living Room Discussion

The Dilemma

I want to be “led by the Spirit.” (What could be more important than a sweet relationship and partnership with Jesus?!) I know that it is the “church” (not my individual “walk”) that “the gates of hell cannot withstand.” It is the “church” (not my personal finite understanding of things) that is “the pillar and foundation of Truth.” Every matter should be “established by the testimony of two or three.” Also, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” There is “wisdom in a multitude of counselors,” and “Admonish one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” And, and, and....

So then, HOW can I have my own relationship with God, “discern the Body,” and draw on the Life that God has placed in the context of the local church all at the same time?! Doesn’t one make the other unnecessary or contradictory?

Can I have a conviction and still function in oneness and trust of others? What if I have a really strong conviction about a certain thing, and then I ask a few others about it? What if they definitely have a history of walking with God in relationship with Him, but their convictions are totally different from mine? My conviction about this particular thing is very strong, and some trusted laborers in Christ feel entirely differently about it all.

Should my default mode be that, when there are two or three others who see something differently, I should trust their convictions over my own?

Is it better to take a chance on being wrong together than to go fully on what I think and end up being wrong by myself?

Disputable Matters

There's a whole category of things that Romans 14 refers to as disputable matters. It's important that we work that into the equation also. Some things just aren't all that important, such as whether or not we buy a red car or a blue car. In most cases, it's probably not a life or death situation. Of course, you might have had a dream the night before and arrived at a conclusion, based on that dream, that it really **was** a life or death matter. Then, you might have a true, honest-to-goodness conviction that something that would normally be of little importance is worth paying attention to. What if two or three witnesses come along and say, "We really feel like this is a dangerous decision, because of _____." The important issues in "discerning the Body" is not whether or not we come to an impasse, but whether or not we can agree that we are going to work and go forward together and help each other, whatever the future might bring.

Do we feel certain that the issue is not a disputable matter, but that we have a conviction that we believe is from God? We need to use that terminology very carefully. The things I choose to express as "convictions" should not easily be about small, trivial issues. And, the things I defend "against all comers" ought to be things that can be supported in the Word of God and the Character of God—things that have Eternal significance, not simply the traditions and pleasures of men—masked in the lingo of "my conviction." Learn to yield to others. The greatest compliment Jesus paid to anyone was to a man that had learned to yield to others (Mat.8:9-10) and therefore was trustworthy. I want to save the things I consider "convictions" or "the leading of the Spirit" for REAL things, not matters of preference or flesh. I might have opinions about some things. But I ought to save the things I label as convictions for matters that are truly of consequence to Heaven. A conviction is something I've got to stand on. And I'd better be prepared to pay the consequences for standing on it. All of this is too often a charismatic game, based on one's imagination, or a "power" thing where one can exert themselves over others, or a pride thing ("I have my OWN relationship with God!"—"I only listen to the Holy Spirit!"), or some other childish counterfeit.

Not All Convictions Are Created Equal

There are, it should be obvious, different levels of “conviction,” also. For example, an older brother visiting from another country makes a statement in a living room full of people that his grandmother told him the moon is made out of cheese, and since she would never lie to him, it is most certainly made of cheese. I have a “conviction” that the moon is not made out of cheese. However, I also have a conviction that Jesus offered His Blood that we not belittle one another, and that we make every effort towards Unity in His Spirit and Righteousness. As you might guess, this conviction is a HIGHER conviction than the one about the composition of our moon’s surface. Therefore, I SAVE my conviction about the moon’s composition for some other occasion when it would not embarrass this brother. It is simply not important, though it is a “conviction.” There might well be a subject relating to this brother’s church or family or personal relationship with God that would require important conversation, and we do not need to discuss anything as trivial as the moon and “use up” our convictions on the unimportant. I’m sure you remember the fable of “The Boy Who Cried ‘Wolf.’”

While being careful to not be overbearing with “my convictions,” I MUST not, on the other hand, be lazy in pursuing God. When issues are “at stake” I must cultivate a relationship with Him that is not simply (and tragically) second-hand. I really do need to learn to hear God and befriend Him (Jn. 15:14-15; Rom. 8:13-14; Jn. 17:3). To simply take everything that others are convicted about at face value without pursuing God Himself is a shallow way to live and very unfulfilling. To put oneself above the Life of Jesus in His church by “doing my own thing” is to persecute and reject Jesus. What a dilemma! Not. It really is a simple and beautiful thing to do it all God’s Way. Let’s look a little deeper.

Paul Had To!

An example: Paul had a conviction he should go to Jerusalem. We may find ourselves in a similar situation to the one Paul was in when Luke and Agabus (the prophet) and some of the other folks said, “Paul, do not go to Jerusalem. Don’t do it.” Here is the Spirit of Oneness that the Father is looking for at such a delicate time: Paul said, in essence, “I’m sorry, I have to do this. I must go to Jerusalem. I wish I could do it your way. You know me. I’m not being arrogant or hardheaded or

disrespectful. I dearly love you brothers. I just believe with all of my heart that I MUST go to Jerusalem. Would you be supportive of me? I NEED you to stand by me.”

Paul needed to walk out of that room either having stuck to his conviction or having fully given his heart over to those brothers who said, “Don’t go. Don’t go.” There could be nothing in the back of his mind like “We’ll see... I think I’m right... I’ll show them... I told them so... I really resent them making me do it this way, but I guess I had better go along with it...” To walk out of the room with that attitude would be sin against God. Paul would have heard for the second time from the resurrected Jesus, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”

On the other hand, if the others had walked out of the room thinking, “Paul is just pig-headed and hyper-spiritual... He’s an elitist... The rules don’t apply to him... He just thinks he’s better than everybody else... We told him he shouldn’t go, and off he goes... Five against one, and he does it anyway...” If anybody had walked out of the room with that attitude, they too would have sinned against the Living God by not discerning the Body.

By the time they walked out of that room, either Paul would go out totally supportive of the other brothers and do it their way, or they would go out totally supportive of Paul and do it his way. Or, perhaps, they would not do anything until they knew together what the Father wanted them to do. Regardless, there would be a mutual commitment that whatever happened next, they were going to be together and work it out together. That’s God’s attitude about it. And that’s exactly what they did.

The Spirit of Christ speaking through a brother or sister in a situation such as Paul’s (with a differing of convictions) would sound like, in essence, “Brothers, I hear what you’re saying. I understand where you’re coming from. I appreciate it, and I respect you deeply. I don’t ever in my life recall having to go directly against what you brothers collectively have thought needed to happen. But, in this case, I must go and I am begging you to support me in this. If I’m wrong, help me to pick up the pieces later if there is anything left to pick up. But I have to do this and I need your support.” In Paul’s situation, they supported him and wished him well. Nobody stormed out of that room, and nobody went out of that room slandering Paul as being pig-headed or hyper-spiritual or an elitist

or anything unkind or divisive. To them, discerning the Body meant a commitment that they would work together.

Now if it were a disputable matter, shame on Paul if his preference or his opinion allowed him to overrule all those brothers! Shame on him. But, if you trace it back about 20 years, he had a vision in the temple after his conversion that he would stand before the Gentiles and their kings. He had 20+ years of knowing there would be a time when he would have to stand in front of kings. And now they are saying, “Paul, if you go to Jerusalem, you’re going to be bound. You’re going to have to stand in front of kings.” And he says, “I know. I have to. I was told that I’d have to talk to the Gentiles and to their kings. This is just the next step in my life. I hate it too. But I have to. It’s a conviction.” It wasn’t a disputable matter. He had real evidence that he was to move in that direction.

There will be things that are disputable matters, and I want to yield as many of those as I can to others who have convictions. I want to make sure, though, that it’s their convictions I’m yielding to, not just their preferences or opinions. I don’t want opinions and preferences imposed on me in hyper-spiritual lingo. But if there’s a conviction about the matter, I really want to be supportive of it. If I possibly can be, I will be. And if I have a conviction to the contrary, I’m not just going to blow them off. I’m going to beg them to work with me on it. “Support me in this, and we’ll walk it out together. I need your support. I need you to help me through this. This is a conviction I have to follow. Please?”

Abraham Had To!

There’s a scene in the movie *Abraham* in which Abraham was teaching Isaac how to shoot a bow and arrow. His friend came up to him and said, “Come on Abraham, let’s go back. A family wants you to perform a circumcision.” But Abraham said, “I have disappointed God before, I will not do it again. I must train Isaac and not be distracted in anyway, even by good things. This one thing I do.” Behind the scenes, Abraham said, “I bet you have talked to Sarah, haven’t you?” She was, in fact, not supportive and was speaking to others secretly about her opinions. Sounds much like Miriam and Aaron’s conversation about their view of some of Moses’ decisions in Numbers 12, doesn’t it? Look it up. God was not amused. Slandering what one does not understand is a serious sin listed

in Jude. Sarah, in her case, was essentially slandering her head. Again, it is certain that God was not amused.

Now I realize that scene in the Abraham movie was fictitious; it probably never really happened. But the point is that Abraham had a conviction and they were not being supportive of it. In fact, they were talking about him behind his back. “Yea, I have been talking to Sarah and she questions this too.” That sort of dissension behind the scenes is very destructive. Abraham had a clear conviction. He would not let God down again. He had disappointed Him before, and he wasn’t going to do it again. They should have supported him in that conviction instead of questioning why he wasn’t doing circumcisions like he was “supposed to.” He was attempting to follow God’s Light for his life, and they were thinking he should be doing something else. They didn’t (in the movie) even sit and talk with him about his “strange” behavior! That’s an example of what *not* to do in a situation where we “have a conviction” that a brother is moving in the wrong direction. He may be, but let’s talk! The “double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.” It is likely that if he is motivated by sin or foolishness, it will come out in the course of up-close living. (This brings up another point. We **MUST** be living out the command of Heb.3:12-14, **DAILY**, with all of our local brothers and sisters in order to work out much of what the Father would be calling us to. Please put yourself in that situation, for Jesus sake, or you’ll likely never know what your Destiny might have been! We’ll need to discuss this a bit more, later on, for sure.)

As a rule, in disputable matters, we need to help everybody to sort out the situation that has come up as clearly as possible (based on Godly teachings and principles) and then just do the best we can with it. But some issues are really not disputable matters. They are matters of deep conscience and conviction, based on real things. In such cases, it really isn’t proper to ask or demand that people violate their consciences and convictions. We need, instead, to support them and help them to walk it out (and then help them to pick up the pieces later if they were wrong). We need to do everything we can to help them see it as clearly as possible, and then we need to be as supportive as we can, like we would if Paul decided to go to Jerusalem.

“You Who Are Spiritual”

Here’s the tricky part, though. What if you get together with people whose minds are not conformed to the Word of God, who are not building on the

principle of putting His Word “into practice”? (Mat.7) Unregenerate and immature folks can have all sorts of opinions about all sorts of things. There will always be, in a typical “church” situation, loose cannons on the deck ready to blow somebody’s head off! “I have a conviction and God told me this and that,” says one whose whole life is a shambles. It’s not believable. “I don’t have a huge reason to believe God told you anything. I have little evidence, based on the quality of your life and character in your home and workplace and your speech and decisions, to believe that you are able to hear God accurately about things like this.” Quality of life comes into play. “A tree is known by its fruit,” and “wisdom is proved right by her children.” “Your babies, I’m sorry to say, are much deformed. I’ve seen your character and heard your tongue. I know a bit about your days. I know of your attitude when you come home from your workplace. I know of your lack of hunger for the Word, and your pride. I don’t trust your wisdom very much at this point, though I am willing to listen. And I even know that God can work something through it. But your fruit, as you must admit, is not very good, and your walk with God is seriously questionable.” Sometimes that will come into play in a conversation with someone who has a “conviction” about something. He may really need to question his own wisdom as he takes an honest look at his own fruit.

But it’s different when you’re dealing with people of integrity who really desire to walk out the Word of God in their lives. The practice of their lives is built on the Rock, and they are putting His Word into practice. They are stable and sound, and their fruit is solid. Their lives are trustworthy as they are “in the midst” “daily from house to house.” They live testable, Light-walking sort of lives **amongst** the Saints (as opposed to “alongside of” the saints, “about” the saints, or “in front of” the saints based on “reputation” or the plastic fruit of public performance). Then, when they have a conviction about something and my conviction differs, we can and must, come out of that room supportive of whatever decision we’ve made about it together. That is a demonstration of our commitment to discerning the Body, to working together and staying together through whatever consequences this thing might bring. To store judgments or opinions, or to engage in any sort of slander in our hearts or bitterness toward someone else, would be **very destructive**. We can’t permit these things in our hearts. It is just an absolute shame for Jesus, and a tragic loss of Testimony, for anything less than Oneness to be the conquering Fruit of obedience and humility.

The Son—With Us in the Fiery Furnace

Back to some practical problems. Suppose you have a knot in your stomach about something, yet there's no clarity about it. You can't really explain why you feel this way. And if someone were to ask you, you'd have to say, "I don't know." You just have a knot in your stomach. Does that come from conviction or is it better described as an opinion? It might even run contrary to what you want to do. Your flesh wants to do one thing, but you *need* to do the opposite. You just don't know why.

Well, I'd probably say something like this: "Brothers, if you can, I really need you to support me in this. I hear what you are saying and it sounds right, but I've got this knot in my stomach and I really feel like I need to go this way. Can you support me in it? Will you work with me on it?" That way, you're not just blowing them off. Your attitude isn't, "Well, you're trying to violate my conscience and I don't like it. I have a knot in my stomach because I think I ought to do this and you're trying to tell me to do that instead, and I resent it."

You can, of course, have that kind of haughty or impatient attitude about it. Or you can turn to them in submission and "discern the Body." "I hear what you're saying, and I appreciate it completely. You're probably even right. But I have this knot in my stomach that says I've got to do this. Will you support me in it? I need your help. I can't conscientiously do it that way. I can't even tell you why. But would you be willing to do a little experiment with me and help me through this? Then you can laugh at me and tell me 'you told me so' later. You'll get your enjoyment out of it, and I'll learn my lesson the hard way. But would you stick with me on it?"

That way, you're still submissive and discerning the Body, as opposed to being embittered by them trying to make you do one thing when you wanted to do something else. Nor are you acting like a dead rat, dragged around by the tail saying, "Okay, okay, I have a conviction about this, but they all say otherwise, so I'll just roll over and play dead." No, you really do need to talk about it further and work it through to a deeper level until there's a mutual relational submission on it. Don't hide from that "dealing" that your heart is very likely in need of, even beyond the issue itself!

Of course, if it's just a preference or an opinion, bag it. Listen, there's "wisdom in the multitude of counselors." Listen up. If it's just your feeling, preference, or opinion, bag it. Go with those that are over you in the Lord

or those that are around you in the Lord. But if it really is a conviction, then a submissive way to handle it is to ask them to work with you on it. Tell them what you're feeling, even if you don't know why, and ask them to work through it with you. And unless they know for a fact it **is** a life-or-death issue spiritually, they, more than likely, will work with you on it. They will find some way to do so. Maybe Agabus will go with Paul to Jerusalem or something like that. "I feel much better about that. I still don't think you should go, but if Agabus is with you, I can live with it much more easily."

In other words, there might be another answer we haven't considered, which God has for us, if we will persevere **together**. After all, He did **promise** to be with us in a special way when we're together, and unified (Mat. 18). As long as we are committed to each other enough not to blow it off or roll over and play dead, Jesus can work with us, as He did in that other "fiery furnace" with our three brothers, Shadrach and friends. There might be another possibility that would manifest the incredible riches of God's Wisdom, if we'd simply submit ourselves to His Ways in order to hear Him.

Finding the Words

Now you may be wondering whether, over time, you'll eventually grow out of not being able to explain the feelings of conviction that you have. Is that sort of connectedness with the Father, where you know what He is trying to tell you, something that you grow into? Must I go on bumbling and stumbling around like a fool until I get there?

Well, I'd have to say that I know those that are a hundred times better now than six or eight years ago at understanding those spiritual "gut feelings," and comprehending the Scriptures that bring explanation to the issues at stake. They are more able to put words, rather than just feelings, on the Father's voice. That does come with time. But it isn't necessarily true that you'll **always** know why. Why did Abraham leave his parents' homeland and go out into the wilderness? He never did find out why he was going. And it wasn't just because he wasn't spiritual enough. There was no way he could have been spiritual enough back in Ur to know what was going to happen. The Father just flat wasn't telling him. He just said, "Go, I'm not telling you where. I'm not telling you why. Just go." He just had his spiritual "gut feeling" to go on.

In most cases, though, God does have clear thoughts in His mind. Jesus said, “I tell you my plans because you’re my friends” (Jn. 15). The closer our friendship with Jesus is, the more likely He is to let us in on His plans—not just what He’s doing, but why He’s doing it. As our friendship grows, we really will know most of the time what that knot in our stomach is about and why we have it. Most of the time, but not always.

As we work through these things together and make mistakes and fall on our faces, that’s okay. More than anything else, God is after our hearts. He’s out to make us more into the image of Jesus.

Uncommon Living

These are extremely important matters. Frankly, most people that care have had enough experience in the church world to know that most people do whatever they please—and seldom does anyone so much as raise an eyebrow or ask a question. They do exactly what they want, when they want, how they want. And no one dares to ask them about it. Just the ability to talk about convictions involving our personal lives and decisions, our property, and our children is rare. To be able to talk about these root issues of life is just a very uncommon blessing that few have. Thank God forever for this Blessing, if you have it. There certainly is more “Light” (Jn. 3, 1Jn. 1) and challenge when the people around you everyday **care** about your Life in Christ (2Tim.3:16-17), but the alternative is hideously empty and dangerous (Heb.3:12-14).

However, uncommon blessings introduce uncommon factors. For instance, the very questions we’ve been discussing really only apply to a few people on earth. Most people don’t have convictions about anything. When they do, very seldom is there ever anybody close enough in relationship to them that would have convictions to the contrary. Most people, I say with great grief in my heart for them and for Jesus, aren’t building on the Word of God in the first place. So, very seldom are there really any convictions at stake, just opinions and preferences.

Some Conditions for Hearing Together

You know, there are several components needed just to make this an important discussion in the first place. You have to be building your life on the Word of God rather than on your feelings and desires—that’s rare.

You have to be building with other people on a daily basis—that’s rare. You have to be building in such a way that your life is an open book to everybody around you, and you invite input into your life—that’s rare. You must want, with all of your heart, for Jesus to be exalted in your life and in His church, regardless of personal cost. All of these things must be in place before this matter of working out convictions with others will make any sense at all.

Whose Voice Am I Hearing?

Now, is it possible that a “conviction” that you think you have “heard from God” could simply have originated in your flesh? Yes, definitely. Sorting that out is part of the process of growing into the Image of Jesus! Suppose you have a conviction, and I ask you to consider whether it might just be your flesh. You say, “Well, I’m open to that possibility, but I don’t think that’s it.” Well, maybe I have a sneaking suspicion (because I’ve been around the block a few more times than you have) that it just might be your flesh, and you are kind of missing the point. As long as we’re committed to one another, and I’m not willing to violate your conviction (or at least what you think is your conviction), and I’m also not willing to violate our relationship, we’re gonna come through it together. We’ll go down the road a little bit farther and you will see that the fruit of this thing you were committed to doing is bad. This thing that you thought was conviction was really just your flesh. You thought it was the Spirit, but it was really your soul. Something “iffy” will come out of it, and then I’ll say, “Well, okay, here’s what you can learn from that…” In time, you will begin to better discern the voice of God.

Remember how Jesus said to Peter, “Who do **you** say that I am?” and Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus said, “Simon Peter, my Father in Heaven revealed that to you. Men didn’t reveal it to you—my Father did.” Then, remember this insane episode? A few minutes later, Peter was taking Jesus aside and rebuking him for talking about his death. Jesus said, “Get behind me, satan!” In a matter of moments, Peter went from clearly hearing the Father to hearing the devil and **thinking** he was still hearing the Father! He really didn’t know who was who.

That’s the position where we often find ourselves, especially early in our walk with God. Here’s a guy who heard the Father. Jesus never said that to anyone before that we are aware of. “You heard the Father speak to

you, Peter. Good job.” It wasn’t an audible voice, but clearly he heard the Father in his spirit to be able to say what he did. He wasn’t guessing. Jesus said that Peter had actually heard the Father! But a few minutes later the exact same guy listened to the devil and quoted him. Jesus had to tell him, “Get behind me, satan!” So it’s possible for our “reception” to go a little haywire, so that the channels kind of bleed over the top of each other. It’s like watching two things happen at once and you can’t pick out which one is which.

The University of “Constant Use”

The Scriptures say that we “exercise ourselves unto godliness.” At the end of Hebrews 5 we read, “Solid food is for the mature who, by constant use, have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” It comes by constant use. In other words, sometimes, if it is not too dangerous, I need to let you run that course, even if it **is** your flesh, so that you, too, can learn “by constant use.” Perhaps I need to let you run that course, and just stick with you to help and protect as you go. I can be committed to going to “Jerusalem” with you, even though I’m sure you’re wrong. Then I’ll be there to help you sort it out later when something bad happens, so that you can learn from it. “All right, now I begin to see what a bad decision that was. I was sure at the time it was right, but here’s what’s happened since then. Now I see.”

If We Don’t Hang Together, We’ll Hang Separately

So, through constant use, you get a little better at discerning what’s God’s voice and what’s not His voice. You have to exercise. It’s by **constant use**. We will likely not grow to know His voice well as long as I’m sure that your conviction is wrong (and my conviction is right), and I don’t stick with you while you run your course. Likewise, if I abandon you saying, “All right, then, just have it your way!” I won’t be there to help you learn from it. You’ll either suffer the consequences or be deceived into thinking there are no consequences. But you won’t learn what you need to learn.

Sure, it can be “flesh,” totally wrong, absolute nonsense when you thought it was a “Spirit-led conviction.” Even so, we somehow need to figure out

what to do when we aren't really certain, and when we are "certain" but are wrong. If you're sure it's a conviction, refined by the Word of God, and not just a preference or an opinion, I need to honor that. This is where Paul was coming from when he spoke with unbelievable ease of Apollos defying Paul's conviction in 1Cor.16:12. Think about it. Paul was sure that Apollos needed to go to Corinth. Apollos was certain that he should be doing something else. What was Paul's response to Apollos' difference of conviction? Though Paul still held his ground as to his conviction, he was very willing to be supportive of his brother as they worked it out for Jesus' sake. That's the kind of teamwork that allows us to learn together by constant use how to hear God's voice. If my conviction proves to be right and yours were to blow up in your face, I could say, "I told you so." But I won't. Instead, I'll help you see what you could have learned from it. I'll explain why I felt the way I did, and maybe you can see why you didn't grab onto it in the first place. It's a teamwork thing. It's not about me, having my personal walk with God and hearing His voice, while you do your own thing and I do mine. **Together** we learn to hear God. **Together**. There's got to be a commitment to being together if we want to clearly hear God.

"...I will build my CHURCH that the gates of hell cannot prevail against."

"...the CHURCH, which is the pillar and foundation of Truth..."

"...where two or three are gathered in My Name, there will I be."

"...together, with all the saints...."

"...Christ in you (plural), the hope of Glory."

Classroom and Laboratory

Are there actually times when it's right to let somebody pursue a course that looks like a mistake? Sure. Maybe you've been down that road before and you know what's up ahead, but you don't say anything. You just watch and pray, and you make sure you're by their side when they fall. Of course, there could be some things a brother or sister would choose to do that are just hideously dangerous, and they don't see it. In that case, you might have to throw your body in front of their path and beg them to reconsider. But with other things, when the consequences aren't really

that great, you can afford to let them learn the hard way. Just make sure you're close by to help them sort it out later.

But, it's really not just one way of learning Christ, or another. God, in His Wisdom, uses a combination of things to teach and refine us. When you learn chemistry, for example, a lot of learning comes through academic teaching. But then there are the laboratories, where you can get your hands on the chemicals and start messing with the Bunsen burners and pipettes. You start to see and experience what the things you are learning about really look like. It all becomes more practical, and the visual and hands-on experience adds a new dimension to the whole thing. Chemistry moves from a two-dimensional proposition to a three-dimensional one when you go into the laboratory.

Does that mean we don't ever need teaching or "reproof, rebuke, or correction?" Well, to return to our chemistry analogy, I doubt you could really understand much of what chemistry is really about if all you did were laboratories. We don't need to be afraid to teach someone what Jesus said about a particular issue, but know that there will be "laboratories." It's not even like we need to set up for the labs. We all will get our time to work in the lab of Life, for sure. The more "teaching" we can get to prepare us for life, the less likely we are to get burned by the crucible. There's no great merit in letting everybody learn everything the hard way. They will learn enough things the hard way without me having to create new opportunities by not saying anything when I could.

Trust, Built on Relationship

Now that brings us back to the situation with Luke and Agabus. They had a conviction that Paul shouldn't go to Jerusalem. Even so, they wouldn't let their conviction take priority over their respect for Paul's convictions. Where did this respect come from? Was it how "powerful" his "sermons" were? Was it his good looks, his charm, his musical talent, his forcefulness? No way!!! Their ability to walk with him, through this thing they did not understand or agree with, grew out of knowing him and watching (not just hearing about) his relationship with God. He had lived among them as a father, a mother, and a brother "night and day with tears." This was not the equivalent of today's superstars or clergymen. This was a true man of God "in the midst as one who serves." They knew him!

“For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.”
1 Thessalonians 2:3-10

What if Luke or Agabus had stepped in and said, “No way, I don’t care how strong you feel about this. I’m telling you, if you do it, you’re wrong!”? I guess it would have been pretty obvious that they trusted their own conviction more than they trusted Paul as a brother, even with his life and relationship with God.

What you **really** know about a person’s life and walk with God has, to play a serious role in weighing whatever convictions you might have about the other person and their decisions, or their convictions about you and your decisions. You can certainly share your convictions with anyone that claims Jesus, but where there is relationship, there is trust. If you love them and you know their walk, you can trust that they’re in good hands, even when things fall apart. Please don’t allow any pride or immaturity to dull you that you would allow your love for a fellow-her to come second to your own personal convictions.

Of course, referring to the men and women that attempted unsuccessfully to talk Paul into avoiding Jerusalem, those folks had an advantage over most people today. These guys had spent a lot of years with Paul, directly and indirectly. (If I am walking intimately with a tested and true disciple, and he or she is in a fire-proven relationship with disciple that I don’t know personally, I know everything that I need to know to trust that disciple that I don’t know personally!) Again, in most religious environments

today, people don't know people. They may **think** they know someone because they've listened to his speeches, bought his cassette tapes, read his books, or even hung out with him on Sunday morning. Here's what the Scriptures command you to do if you want to obey God and truly **know** someone: "Admonish one another daily so that none are hardened and deceived by sin, as long as it's called Today." Since that is almost entirely absent in the religious world today, there's really no way to "know" as we ought, and consequently, much of the rest of the Scripture is difficult to apply correctly also! If I asked you to "go three blocks to the east and turn right, go two houses down the street and park in the driveway" but you started in a different city than I thought you did, my directions wouldn't mean much, would they? That is how difficult it is to live out "Biblical" Christianity in a church world that has priorities and connectedness so unlike what the folks in Acts 2:42-47 had. We need to get back to the basics of why we live! And we need to expect that our churches would reflect that Relationship with Jesus and one another in every nook and cranny, or we die trying!

"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." Colossians 1:24-2:4

"My dear children, I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" Galatians 4:19

Again, those brothers **knew** Paul's life. This guy was involved in their lives. He was in their homes. He was part of their families. Read Romans 16: "This woman was a mother to me." There are so many people you never even hear about in the book of Acts. "This person worked hard by my side and co-labored with me." "This person risked his life for me." And Romans was written only about halfway through Paul's life. He crossed paths with a lot of other people even after that, I would guess.

Here's the point. Paul was right in the thick of life, "in the midst as one who served." When they said they knew his life, they **knew** his life! That's an advantage most people who are attempting, even honestly, to understand how to respond to one another's "convictions" don't have today. Try to function the way they did, and people today would say, "Ah, man, they're just too gullible, too willing to trust somebody." Well, okay. If you don't have any real relationships with anyone, I guess I could see your point. It **would** be gullible for you to give into everything that came along from a pulpit or some other source, since you don't have a real, intimate relationship with them and those around them on a daily basis. There is no "admonishing one another daily," "encouraging one another daily," or "being called alongside one another daily" as God has said. But when you **do** have relationships, **your whole world changes**, and then some of the rest of this can make sense!

God Wins!

Regardless of how much these guys trusted Paul, **they also trusted God**. They saw that Paul's heart was such that God was going to work with it. It was going to be okay, even if this were a total mistake, resulting from Paul's blind side. Maybe Paul had some secret ambition to be a martyr and he just couldn't see it. But they knew his heart was sincere and, for that reason, they could trust God. It wasn't like they had to trust Paul to be perfect. (He's had a pretty good track record on hundreds of other things, so he's probably right about this one.) It went beyond that.

They went the extra step and said, "You know, even if he is wrong (and this is the first mistake I've seen him make in 25 years), I trust that his heart is sincere and I trust God." It's not that they trusted Paul perfectly and "blindly." It's that they trusted God, and they knew Paul's heart pretty well. So, what if this turned out to be a totally bone-headed mistake? They would all learn

from it. They would work together and learn from it. Trusting God was an even bigger issue than trusting Paul, although they did that too.

Now, if you don't trust somebody's heart because his track record is poor, this gets to be a lot more complicated. If you've seen him violate Jesus, if you've seen him betray God and man again and again, then how are you supposed to believe him this time? How can you really trust him when his record is one of sin and selfishness, pride and ambition? It's a bit more difficult. "God works everything together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes." They knew Paul loved God and that his life was about His purposes. Thus, even if this were a mistake, God would work it together for the good. As long as those two things were in place, they didn't even have to trust Paul. But when you don't have much evidence that a person loves God or is called according to **His** purposes, there may not necessarily be much reason to think God is going to work this together for the good.

Expect Supernatural Conflict

"Some have gone out from among us, proving they never were one of us," John said. There will always be "thorns in the flesh" and those that despise the Light (1Jn.1, Jn.3). Who are the targets of the Light-haters? Their targets are all those who question the religious world's status quo and love of the world system, as well as questioning individual lukewarmness or profiteering upon Jesus' Name. The Light-haters will eat, without qualms, at your love feasts, and then firmly thrust a short dagger in your back when given a chance. Since they did not truly give their life to Jesus or to others (very related ideas 1John 4:20), they built dangerously upon the sand. They could not relate to the ability to love and trust the way Agabus and Luke did with Paul. They didn't co-labor, as brothers amongst brothers. They never lifted a finger (except to advance their own independent cause, their so-called "ministry"), spiritually speaking. Consequently, there wasn't the ability to relate to that kind of trust. The lack of "discerning the Body" has brought the kind of judgment into their life that Paul warned would take place. Shimei doesn't always receive Justice immediately. God allows some challenging and hateful things to persist, even allowing Jannes and Jambres the temporary ability to do "miracles" against God's true Cause in order to refine our characters! But, in the end, He will prepare a table for His Faithful, in the presence of their enemies. Stay with Jesus and His Ways, regardless of the consequences of men and hell's demons, and He will vindicate in His time.

Finding God at the Impasse

Let's go back to the previous discussion of good brothers looking for a solution from the Heart of God to a difficulty. What do you suppose would have happened if Agabus and the others hadn't been supportive of Paul's decision? Would Paul have gone to Jerusalem, based on his convictions, regardless of what they said? Well, I bet Paul would have at least taken a couple of days to fast with them before anything else happened. I bet he would have at least stopped the process in order to go deeper with it all and find out what God was saying through the impasse.

No matter what, you never **really** reach an impasse when you are working with true disciples of the Carpenter. There are always ways to get to the truth of the matter and solve difficult differences of "conviction." God has given us lots of tools to work it out. Even if Agabus and the bunch had said, "We just can't let you do it," there would have been a solution.

Sometimes God will do some pretty tricky things to conform us to His purposes. Maybe it's just a matter of timing if I spend two days fasting with these brothers. I'll miss the boat, and it will be another month before I can go. Well, maybe God wanted Paul to wait another month because He had other things for him to do before he went to Jerusalem. So the impasse was God's way to make the timing work out properly. There can definitely be other factors at work. I can have "convictions" that are not based on all of the facts, and God allows my conviction to be formed with "mirrors." "I KNOW the sun is larger when it sets, than it is during the day. I can see it with my own eyes! How can you ask me to believe otherwise?!" Sometimes, by God's Decree, things are not as they so obviously appear, by God's Decree. Let's proceed cautiously, even when we KNOW something is so. God is sometimes working other things out and confuses our view of things a bit in order to accomplish His Purposes and Timing. Make room for that. This is a strong motivation to "Keep the unity of the Spirit, and the bond of Peace" as we work through differing convictions.

If we're willing to "wait on the Lord," there's always a solution. It's not just a big battle where the stronger conviction wins. I feel certain that God's wisdom would have opened up some other door that they hadn't considered. "Okay, Paul, we're all going with you." There has to be an answer in God's heart that can satisfy the souls of men who love Him and are connected to the Head.

There has to be some constant in God's heart and mind for all of those who are connected to the same Head. It's like the story of Cinderella, where the prince went from house to house trying to find the only foot in the whole kingdom that the glass slipper would fit. That's often what happens in the Spirit, when you're trying to find God's will. Paul wants to go to Jerusalem, but that doesn't "fit" with these other brothers. They want him to stay put, but that doesn't "fit" either. So in this process of praying and fasting, considering the Scriptures and talking it over, Agabus and Silas and Luke and Philip all say, "We're going with you," and the "glass slipper" slips on. Now Paul can go, and they can be totally satisfied in their hearts.

From experience I can say I'd have a hard time believing that God would tease sincere men desiring to be led by the Spirit of the Son. It won't be very often that we can't find some way that the "slipper" fits on where everyone feels satisfied that God's will is being done and they're not fighting God. But it's not always what either party originally thought. It's another answer entirely that brings us to a place of peace in the Spirit. We have to fight for it, because neither of us came into the room having considered it yet. But your opposition to my way and my opposition to yours forced us to look for something else and then we found God's heart, together.

“Movement” Centered, or Driven by Love?

One of the many things that God is doing in us, if we allow Him to use our misplaced “convictions,” is confusing and embarrassing us, and humbling us into a correct view of Him, of His Church, and of ourselves. If our “energy” for spiritual things is centered upon ideas or a movement or personal ambition or any such carnal thing, God will use very creative means to find a way to change our hearts. He will graciously permit all that originates in man to fall apart. If what we have set our hearts and minds on is truly centered in our Love for Him and our Love for others, with no regard for ourselves, it will grow from “glory to glory.” Keep an eye on God's marvelous Ways of purging us of self-life through the means of differing “convictions” among brothers and sisters. Let the quality of your response to others and to God be reflective of the knowledge that God may be using this conviction that you think you have to teach you and equip you in a “back door” sort of way!

What About “Authority”?

There certainly must, we would all agree, be some discussion in all of this about how to deal with “authority” in Jesus’ church. Some would wish that there were no such thing! The Korah spirit, as prophesied by Jude, is alive and well in today’s church world.

“These men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals these are the very things that destroy them. Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error; they have been destroyed in Korah’s rebellion.” Jude 1:10-12

They say (as Paul said that those that do not “discern the Body” and walk in immaturity would), “I am of Christ! I don’t need anybody but Jesus!” “We ALL have the Spirit!” says Korah of yesterday and today. “Why do you think anyone needs to listen to you?!” This is a very bad idea. It cannot go well for one with this attitude, as it violates the heart and soul of Messiah.

Others, it seems, are paralyzed with fear and the veiled spiritual threats of ambitious men, “Touch not God’s anointed!” They find it difficult to find Jesus, Himself, amidst the whine and drone of men’s sermonizing and scheming in today’s church world. SURELY there is Hope! And there is, thank our God. There is a perspective that frees us all to find Jesus **IN** His Body, as He intended, rather than to have to choose **between** Jesus and a group of mere men.

Some of this understanding of God and His Ways can be found in a book entitled *Spiritual Authority* by W. Nee. Though I have no first-hand experience with this book, I know many trusted followers of the Master who have read it and recommend it heartily for insight into these things. See if you can locate it, if you would like to consider this topic more in depth.

The following letter also will, I believe, draw you deeper in an understanding of the Life of Jesus to be found in this idea of “authority.” It was written by a man to a young group of Believers that were together trying to find Jesus in a corporate setting. They were “up against the wall” and were, in essence, deciding a great deal about their future together as they tried to answer the question together, “What is authority?!” I pass

on this personal letter from a man to his friends as encouragement to you in your Journey also.

January 14, 1995

To my dearest friends, brothers and sisters of the heart, through whom the supply of Jesus so often comes to me—

I hope these thoughts will somehow bless you. That's my prayer, and the full intent of my heart. You have been such a blessing to me that I couldn't put it into words. God knows how much you've given me, and whenever I despair of returning even half as much to you, I remember that the Father, who is in secret, will Himself reward you a good measure, pressed down and running over, poured into your laps, and that makes me happy again!

Lately several of us have been wrestling with the question of spiritual authority and submission, and the related question of private opinions versus group convictions. In other words, when should I as an individual give up privately held opinions and abide by a conviction someone else holds as important? How am I to work out Paul's admonition to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"? When does a question fall under the Romans 14 "disputable matters" category of things we should just keep between God and ourselves?

I'll admit in advance what you already know—I don't have all the answers, or even all the questions. But I would like to share a perspective that I hope can help us search out God's truth and wisdom with a greater freedom and peace. If we can do that together, I'm sure I can count on you to help me, for one, understand how to work out the practical implications.

It's probably no accident that we are encountering these questions now. They are body life issues. Until now, we've mostly been concerned about our own personal connections with the Head. We'll still need to pay attention to that question forever. But if a baby has been born here, an infant body of Christ, we suddenly have to consider the issue of discerning and responding to group directions from the Head.

That's the kind of body Jesus wants, discerning and responsive. Our human bodies detect signals from the brain and respond almost instantly. Often the brain wants to accomplish a task that only involves the coordinated effort of a few parts. But sometimes I need my entire body to respond as a unit. If I play a song on the piano, it takes almost every part of my body to do it. Do y'all believe that Jesus has performed a miracle and has birthed an ekklesia here?

I don't want to make anybody paranoid (especially me!), but it's an important question. If Jesus isn't building His church among us, we don't have any business trying to act like one. It would only lead to unrealistic expectations and make-believe and frustrations and mistreating one another. But if Jesus Himself is calling us to function as a body, then we've got to deal with some issues as they come up.

One of those issues is how we anticipate that God would take us in some direction as a group. The fact is that He often gives discernment initially to a few people at a given moment, yet He expects the group as a whole to respond. Of course the subset of people He would use might change from moment to moment, but the point is that He often works by providing direction to a few. Under the Old Covenant, Israel was a nation, not just a conglomeration of individuals. When they acted "each man as he saw fit," as in the book of Judges, chaos resulted. When the people responded to God's prophets, there was revival and spiritual health. Under the New Covenant, we as individuals hold a much more glorious privilege of knowing God personally and hearing His Spirit within. Yet in the records of Jesus' "holy apostles and prophets," whom we know to be reliable men and women, we can read that God still often gave group direction through a few people at a time. In Antioch, the Spirit set aside Paul and Barnabas for a specific task. That was a decision that affected everyone. These two guys were valued leaders and teachers, and the whole church sent them on their way. Yet the Spirit gave the initial direction to a small group of five guys who were worshiping and fasting. Then on a later trip, the Spirit showed Paul in a dream to go to Macedonia, and the entire group traveling with him concluded that God was calling them to go. That's just the way God works.

That last paragraph scares me as much as it does you, I promise you. It really shouldn't frighten us, but let's face it, we've all seen examples of ungodly leaders running roughshod over their flock, and justifying it

under the guise of “obey your leaders and submit to their authority” or “touch not the Lord’s anointed.” And we’ve heard stories (some of them ecclesiastical legends, no doubt, but some of them probably true) of even worse abuses. The whole idea of God providing direction to my family and me through somebody else can be terrifying in that light.

Yet a healthy body has to function by each member receiving supply from the others. Either that or we’ll have to dispense with Ephesians 4 and 1Corinthians 12 and several other passages! The alternative to life together is for each of us to try personally to be our own individual body of Christ, and to say to the hand or eye, “I don’t need you.” But we shouldn’t expect Jesus to honor a proud, independent spirit! At best, I’m going to have a gift or two or three, for the benefit of the whole, and if I’m unwilling to receive others’ supply for the gifts I lack, I (and those relying on me, like my children) will be impoverished.

I think we’ve made a lot of progress in trusting one another and being willing to take some risks with each other. In years past, I’ve probably been at or near the bottom of the barrel when it came to the matter of trusting and receiving. But that’s changing. Only yesterday one of you offered an unsolicited opinion about a personal matter, a character issue involving one of my children! And I loved you for it—even more after the phone call than before. I’m certainly not the only one who has grown in this area of receiving supply. It looks like we all have.

Our current “unsettledness” about these issues simply means that Jesus is calling us to embrace His heart for us on a deeper level than before. And that must mean that the Creator and Sustainer, the Ruler and Judge of the Universe has noticed us and for no other reason than His love, He’s decided to call us to another degree of glory! That’s nothing to be afraid of. Jesus really can have local bodies that on the one hand respond instantaneously to His slightest prompting, while on the other hand sniff out false teachings and spirits that would lead them away from His will. We really can reach a point in our maturity where we can *“test everything; hold onto the good; avoid every kind of evil.”* Sensing what has already been bound or loosed in heaven and doing the same on earth is not just a pipe dream.

If the question of corporate discernment and response is a body-life issue, then whatever promotes healthy body life should lead to our being able

to give and receive Christ's supply in a way that honors Him. Here's a passage that describes a healthy corporate life:

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:15-17

That's the kind of body life I desperately want! Peace reigning... thankfulness of heart prevailing... the living, active, powerful word overflowing... needs met through teaching and admonition... worship springing up naturally... deeds being done in the stature and authority of the Name.

Part of that body life has to include our *“letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.”* It has to mean that we speak the word of Jesus into each other's lives, making practical application along with it. Much of that will be one or a few members speaking into the lives of another one or few. But sometimes it will involve a few speaking into the lives of all.

That's part of normal body life. But most of us have seen some undeniable failures in that very area of functioning. I think the preceding verses of Colossians 3 point out the reasons why. Before a group of believers can ever live out verses 13-15, they have to pass through verses 1-12! Here's the first chunk of that:

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since

you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

Here is a picture of the basic life of a disciple. He or she has died and resurrected with Christ and has received a new self that is “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” There is now a progressive “putting to death” and “ridding oneself” of sin.

Unless the individual believers in a group have undergone that basic regeneration of heart and accepted those basic discipleship decisions, there is no way that group can function as a body. They aren't a body. At best they are a mixture, an unholy fellowship of light and darkness, full of leaven that leavens the whole loaf.

The whole question of Jesus taking that group in some desired direction as a group is problematic. Many of the members, maybe even among the leaders, are not even in His hands and under His control! Only those who have laid their lives on the altar of living sacrifice to Jesus, rejecting the patterns of this world, can test and approve God's will, right (Romans 12)? So normally any kind of corporate functioning is a mess. If the leadership is passive, they meet in closed-door sessions and try to determine an agenda. They spring the news on the congregation, motivating and manipulating through promises or threats, hype or scolding, battling all the while the disorder caused by selfish ambition. If the leadership is active, “type A,” and goal-oriented, they try to reign in the congregation through tight control and legalism. Honestly, guys, some of us have been in that kind of group, experienced that kind of leadership, and witnessed the spiritual devastation that resulted. Isn't that at least part of the reason the whole issue of spiritual authority and submission gives us the willies?

But we don't have to function that way, do we? If each of us as individuals actually dies to our old life, receives the new, and progressively learns to walk “hidden with Christ in God,” doesn't that open up a whole new realm of possibility for a corporate functioning that doesn't have to rely on manipulation on the one hand or iron-fisted control on the other?

Then there's the next verse of Colossians 3:

“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

Here, among a crucified and resurrected people, it is possible for Christ to be everything, and for individual differences to melt into insignificance. This matter of unity, of being “joined and knit together,” of being living stones built together and rising up to become a holy temple in the Lord, this, too, is a sovereign issue. If you only have a group of consecrated individuals, healthy functioning by coordinated effort of the whole is still impossible. That’s true in the matter of discernment and response to Christ’s supply. There are exceptions, but normally we are somewhat limited in our relationships with other professing believers with whom we don’t sense that oneness. We might feel a freedom and a responsibility to offer insights about each other’s children, but ordinarily we wouldn’t feel the same freedom with someone we bump into at a shopping mall.

It has taken me a while to understand that principle probably because I wasn’t really joined and knit with anybody for a long time! Back three or four years ago, I wanted so badly to call those of us who were together then a “church.” I wanted us to act like one, too, and I got mad or depressed if we didn’t. Mike told me one time, “Stop trying to draw a circle around a certain group of people and calling the people inside a church, then demanding they act a certain way. Lift up Jesus, allow Him to draw all men to Himself, and let Him worry about the circles.” It was wonderful advice, but hard for me to take.

During that time some of you will remember a young family, relations of another couple living here then, who moved to town for a month or so to “be a part of us.” We were quickly over our heads trying to deal with the sin in that household. There was a stronghold of imaginations and slander in particular. Eventually one of the spouses left the mate and ran home to Mom and Dad. I wanted so badly to bring some sort of group accountability to bear, a Matthew 18 sort of thing, on the problem. But again, Mike suggested, “This person is not accountable to you as a ‘group.’ You’re just not a church, a ‘Lampstand,’ at this point in your corporate Life together, frankly. She’s accountable before Jesus for her sin, and part of that will be making things right with people she’s offended, but she isn’t answerable to you as a group.” He was right.

Groups of believers, even if they are individuals trying to live for Jesus, can still function in some unhealthy ways if they try to get ahead of God and presume on some relationships that just aren’t there. But if there are some people here in this city amongst us who are joined and knit together

in the spiritual realm now, then a healthy corporate functioning should be possible. We may have to function on a pretty young level if we're a corporate newborn, and we may need a lot of help, but a baby is still a wonderfully functioning organism, isn't it?

But there's more:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Even in a group of consecrated individuals who have been joined into “one loaf,” there is still a prerequisite for healthy body-life: love. Without love, there won't be any “binding together in perfect unity.” Attempts to function corporately, whether in the matter of corporate discernment or in other issues of life, will still wind up a disaster.

A few days ago I asked God why I hadn't been much of a blessing to the group as a whole whenever I had developed a conviction about what “we” should or shouldn't be doing. His answer, I think, was that for a long time I just wasn't free to love. Even if I discerned something, I tried to work it out of a critical or prideful heart, and it just didn't help anyone.

But that's not how I see your hearts operating! I see an increasing measure of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. Certainly those words have taken on a new life for me because of the treatment and acceptance I've received in your merciful hands! I hope you've seen my heart melt some, too.

I can't help but believe that if our lives are hidden with Christ in God, if He's tied us together in the spiritual realms, and if we love one another, we can work out this matter of receiving and responding to corporate direction in a healthy way!

This letter's already longer than I intended (surprise!), but there's one other question I wanted to raise on the topic of spiritual authority and submission.

Part of being able to grow into the Head and reach maturity together, as a body, has to do with the process of equipping. Ephesians 4 says,

“It was Christ who gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds and teachers, to equip/prepare/mend God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

The working of each part is necessary. There is a priesthood of believers. There is no clergy-laity system. But it is still true that not all members have the same function. There is not a priesthood of equippers! At any given moment, God’s heart for some will be to bring out the best in the rest, so that the whole can be what it needs to be. That’s why the four (or five) gifts mentioned here, “equipping” gifts, are among Christ’s gifts to His body.

The question of spiritual authority comes into play here. The gift of apostle or prophet or evangelist or shepherd/teacher implies that this person has a foundational role, or word from God, or proclamation of the Message, or group feeding, that the whole group needs to receive and accept. “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority” is still in the scriptures. So is the admonition to “respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord, and who admonish you; hold them in the highest regard in love for their work.” The servant of Jesus will bend over backwards to keep from demanding to be treated this way, but the body will not benefit from his or her service unless they can receive it with such a heart.

The existence of equippers in the body does not take away the member’s need and responsibility to *“test everything, hold onto the good, and avoid every kind of evil,”* for there are false apostles who must be tested and rejected (Rev. 2:2). There are false prophets (Matt. 7:15-23; 24:10) who want to deceive us. There are false evangelists teaching false gospels (Gal 1:6-9) who should be an anathema to us. There are false shepherds who are really ravenous wolves wanting to destroy the flock and draw disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29-30). And there are false teachers (1 Tim. 5:3-5; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; 2 John 9; Rev 2:14-26) who must not be tolerated.

So we must discern but we cannot do that out of a critical, cynical, suspicious, or prideful heart! Otherwise, we will reject the true equippers with the false and miss out on Christ’s gift. We can try to

function without equipping, but we have God's word on it that we will never reach maturity in the faith without it.

Our discernment cannot be based on mere appearances. We must walk by faith, not by sight! Paul was not that impressive of a person from a worldly point of view. Those "super-apostles" he spoke of were much slicker. Some with carnal minds rejected Paul and accepted the impostors, and one direct result was that carnality leavened the church in Corinth!

We must discern with the Spirit. God's direction to us that comes through the body may not always make more logical sense to us than the alternatives, until we later can look over our shoulders and understand why. We've got to learn to discern the Christ life in an individual and in what he or she is saying. We've got to learn to smell the aroma of Christ. All authority in heaven and on earth is in Christ and nowhere else!

I'll stick my neck out and make one practical application before I quit. How are you going to regard an "authority" in your life? We need to think about it. Do you want him to be a resource? A friend? An ecclesiastical 911 emergency service? Someone at arms length, who can give us some neat stuff, but whom we aren't really accountable to? Or do you welcome equippers whom you regard as having spiritual authority? (If you receive a prophet, you receive a prophet's reward. If you receive him only as a friend, you receive only the reward of a friend. If you receive him as an information dispenser, you receive only information, not imparted Life.) Let's each pray that one through, OK?

That's enough for now! Hey being a Christian can be complicated sometimes, but isn't it wonderful anyway? *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God. And that is what we are!"*

In that wonderful love,

Dan (a brother from Ohio)

Join Us in Prayer About All of This?

Father, human beings are pretty shallow as a rule, and I think we would fit into that category. We were created even lower than the angels, yet You desire

*to impart Your life and Your heart and Your Spirit and Your wisdom to us. You do this so that we can reign with You and even **judge** the angels that we were created a little lower than. We know there's a process You are bringing us through. These things are very, very important for us. We need to learn how to walk with each other and go onto the next level together. We don't want there to be any confusion at all about whether or not we can have our own relationship with You and discern the Body at the same time. Those two things will work together in Your heart and mind. There's no question that they can work together, rather than in opposition to each other. Help us to comprehend how all these things work together so we can also help others to walk in them.*

Father, don't let us be shallow. You promised to take us to the place where we're worthy to sit on thrones with You and rule over the nations. We don't feel especially qualified right now, but we trust You, as the Master Teacher, to impart to us, to teach us, and to gift us in such a way that we actually can walk with You in those things in the celestial realms. This is all part of that. Show us how we can function in a relationship with You and with one another that's not competitive, but rather one that works together toward Your glory, and toward the whole of what You want to do in us for the sake of Your Son and His kingdom.

Yours in Him,

Mike

March 10, 1995