

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: Command or Appeal?

For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, I appeal, instead, on the basis of love. Philemon, verse 8 (HCSB)

The verse above jumped out at me as I read the book of Philemon. The situation, of course, is that the Apostle Paul is returning Onesimus - a fugitive slave now converted to faith in Christ under Paul's teaching - back to his owner, Philemon. Philemon, too, is a believer because of Paul's ministry and a leader in the church. Paul desires that Onesimus be received back by Philemon as a forgiven brother in Christ. "Accept Onesimus as you would me," Paul writes. "If he owes you anything, charge it to me."

What I found noteworthy is that Paul appeals in love to Philemon rather than issuing a command. Paul does this even though he acknowledges he has the authority to command had he wanted to use it. His appeal leaves open the possibility that Philemon might do otherwise. Paul is willing to risk that rather than be heavy-handed with his apostolic authority in this matter. He certainly was not timid about the proper exercise of authority as we see in other places in the New Testament, but Paul chooses to go a different route in the case of Philemon.

This raises the question: When does one use formal authority and when does one use an appeal based on relationship and shared values?

My thought is that formal authority is to be used as little as possible and only when absolutely necessary. The reason is that the kind of compliance one gets with an exercise of authority is the least desirable kind - the kind based on fear of consequences. Acts of authority come with an implied threat. The message is, "Do this or else." It is much more ennobling for someone to choose to do the right thing. Their actions will then have the ring of sincerity and the strength of virtue. Practically speaking, people are more likely to do a good job at something if they have chosen to do it as an expression of their values rather than under compulsion from a superior.

Sometimes commands must be issued. Use of authority is necessary when a situation requires immediate action or when a time of confusion requires clear direction. For the most part, though, edicts are a lousy way to get people to do the right thing. It is much better to build relationships of love based on shared values and then lead and influence from this strong bond. Trust trumps power, especially in ministry leadership. This is the wisdom behind Paul's appeal to Philemon.

We must remember that the foundation for such influence is not in a title or a position. It is not built overnight. Paul and Philemon had a history together and it was this history that gave Paul the credibility to make his appeal. It was the shared history that gave Paul confidence that his appeal would

be favorably received. The take-home truth for ministry leaders is this: *Relationships of trust develop over time through shared experiences and demonstrated competence and integrity.* It is this process that establishes the bond of love and shared values. This is the bond that lies at the heart of effective ministry leadership.

Brothers, let us then pray for the wisdom to use formal authority wisely and sparingly, and not to forfeit by rash actions in the short-run what can only be built over the long-haul: True ministry leadership.