

## **Forbidding Forbiddings** **Exploring the Limits of Pastoral Authority**

### **Introduction**

In 1908 Ellen White saw a canvasser crying ironic tears. The aim of his vocation was to spread literature containing present truth. The cause of his sorrow? The rapid sale of our books.

An evangelistic campmeeting of the kind familiar to members one hundred years ago was concluding. In an effort to distribute large quantities of books in a short time the prices had been greatly reduced for the meeting.

In the vision non-members noticed the prices and concluded that the books must be precious if the sellers were willing to make such a sacrifice to distribute them. They purchased multiple copies for themselves and for distribution to their friends.

But dissatisfaction was expressed by some of our own people. "A stop must be put to this work," one said, "or our business will be spoiled." As one brother was carrying away an armful of books, a canvasser laid his hand upon his arm, and said, "My brother, what are you doing with so many books?" Then I heard the voice of our Counselor saying, "Forbid them not." This is a work that should be done. The end is near. . . . [But] some of the workers continued to appear much cast down. One was weeping, and said, "These are doing the publishing work an injustice by purchasing these books at so low a price." . . . The Voice replied, "You are meeting with no loss. . . . Many are now purchasing for their friends and for themselves who otherwise would not think of buying."<sup>1</sup>

Though I have been in the canvassing work for seventeen years, my interest in this story has less to do with the circulation of literature as with the intervention of our Counselor saying "forbid them not."

Perhaps in the literature work, as much as in any other line of gospel ministry, the issue of authority is often raised.

In another instance, in 1888, the General Conference voted that before ministers could take up their calling they must first make a success of the publishing work. Though Ellen White had encouraged ministerial students to canvass, she raised her voice in alarm over the policy.

Why? Because God reserved his right to call men to the ministry whenever and however he may choose. While it was right that brethren of experience "give counsel and suggest plans" they were to leave "each man free to seek direction from God, whose he is and whom he serves."<sup>2</sup>

Today some conferences hold policies that run afoul of the same principle as did that 1888 measure. What if an executive committee, for example, stipulates that only men with Bachelor's degrees can be employed as ministers<sup>3</sup>?

Even the semi-sacred territorial lines of the publishing work were rendered permeable by Mrs. White's pen. If a man felt burdened to do the work in a territory that had been neglected by those responsible for it, no one was authorized to stop him.<sup>4</sup>

Has God no respect for church authority?

God does, indeed, respect church authority. He demands also that members respect it. He grants pastors special privileges on account of their authority.<sup>5</sup>

But the Savior gives to neither men nor committees—apparently even at the General Conference level—the type of authority that was taken in that 1888 meeting. Men are not authorized to dictate to their fellow men.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate these assertions while explaining the nature of the authority that ministers and representative committees do, indeed, carry. Ministers that exercise more than what has been given them to exercise are owed, not the authority they demand, but what the Bible has granted them.

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<sup>1</sup> RH 8-13-1908

<sup>2</sup> Insert reference!

<sup>3</sup> This policy of the West Ghana Conference has prevented several successful evangelistic pastors from receiving remuneration for their full-time work of pastoral ministry.

<sup>4</sup> Insert reference!

<sup>5</sup> For example, special immunity from careless censure. This is coupled, though, with higher accountability. I Timothy 5:19-20.

## Forbidding Forbiddings

Among Christ's prohibitions may be found two worded like the "forbid not" of the canvassing story. One of these rebuked the disciples for their impulse to limit children desiring to approach the Savior.

The other related to their decision to stop what they perceived as a dangerous phenomenon—the rise of other ministers that professed to work for Jesus but that had neglected to seek direction from either Jesus or themselves.

John happened across one such man. The apostle witnessed the unauthorized casting out of a demon in the name of John's Master. Later, as John looked back on the story he was afraid that he might not have done the right thing. To Jesus John confessed "We forbade him."

And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.<sup>6</sup>

John had reasoned in a contrary fashion that "he followeth not with us."<sup>7</sup> Jesus countered that though the worker was not "with" Christ's organization administratively, he was "for" it by the nature of his mission.

The Head of the church seemed much more comfortable than John with elements that might be viewed as out of control in terms of executive authority. From a human standpoint how could the disciples know what ministers like this would be doing next? How could they evaluate their fitness for the work?

Pastors face similar perplexities. So how are they to identify which members should to be encouraged to engage in ministry and which should not?

From Christ's perspective these were not questions for his workers to answer. His line of thought was that if those trying to minister were professing to be working in Christ's name it was certain that they had an internal motive to avoid thoughtless criticism of that Name.

But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me.<sup>8</sup>

Men as close to Jesus as John and as highly honored with responsibility as the twelve disciples tend to make the same mistake today. They confuse the meaning in their honored position. They feel that they are, as it were, delegated governors in that portion of the field committed to their hand.

An illustration of these same principles in our own church history can be found in the testimonies written in regard to the funding and administration of the school in Madison.

Several men in administrative positions in the church were concerned with the fact that Madison existed outside of the conference structure. It was independently owned and operated. Leading men felt that their administrative position in the conference gave them authority to forbid unauthorized fundraising in their territories.

Ellen White rebuked their ideas of church governance. Not only were they unauthorized to forbid Madison's campaign<sup>9</sup>, they were responsible to *support it* with an apportioned subsidy "appropriated" from their conference budget. The "conference committee" was to "act liberally" to support Madison.<sup>10</sup>

"The Lord does not set limits about His workers in some lines as men are wont to set. In their work, Brethren Magan and Sutherland have been hindered unnecessarily. Means have been withheld from them because in the organization and management of the Madison school, it was not placed under the control of the conference."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:50

<sup>7</sup> Luke 9:49

<sup>8</sup> Mark 9:39

<sup>9</sup> "Some have entertained the idea that because the school at Madison is not owned by a conference organization, those who are in charge of the school should not be permitted to call upon our people for the means that is greatly needed to carry on their work. " " " "To those in our conferences who have felt that they had authority to forbid the gathering of means in certain territory I now say: . . . Wherever you are, withhold your forbiddings. The work of God is not to be thus trammelled. . . God forbids you to put any yokes on the necks of his servants." SPM 422, 411

<sup>10</sup> SPM 399-401; (SPTb11, 31-0) June 18, 1907

<sup>11</sup>(SPTb11, 31-0) June 18, 1907

She reasoned that men should have "duly considered" the reasons that Madison operated independently. The field of labor it sought to fill was sadly neglected. As long as they operated in harmony with God's counsel they had a right to a portion of the means received by the church—though they maintained their organizational autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

If something in these testimonies strikes us as odd it may be that we have imbibed some part of the early party-spirit of the apostle John.

Fundamentally, the question addressed in the Madison story is "Does God invest authoritative men in his church with power to forbid and to command their subordinates and parishioners?"

To Ellen White this was an issue of human dependence versus dependence on the Lord. Those who "dare to accept the responsibilities" of exercising such dictatorial authority are "in a dangerous place" and operating "contrary to the Gospel plan."

Their permissions and their forbiddings have fostered wrong ideas regarding the responsibility that individuals should carry, and have led believers to look to man instead of looking to God.<sup>13</sup>

The exercise of authority has been carried to such extremes that it is now time to call a halt; for church members are receiving a false education. A mistake has been made that should be corrected before it is too late.<sup>14</sup>

The motive behind pastors and administrators that exercise this false authority—one never given them by heaven—may be noble. The faithful young man Joshua displayed a similar zeal. When two men who had failed to follow an administrative directive to come to the center of the camp were filled with the Spirit, Moses' colleague was alarmed.

And Joshua . . . said, My lord Moses, forbid them. And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!<sup>15</sup>

Moses hinted at a source of much human forbidding. Joshua felt that Moses' authority and the specialness of his responsibility were being challenged by the work of these two men. They were introducing an element of unknown. Why hadn't they responded to Moses' gathering of the seventy?

But Moses did not share Joshua's concern. His idea of church administration, while including the human element of captains of 1000's, 100's, 50's, and tens, made grateful allowance for individual men to be personally directed by the Holy Spirit.

"We should ever be afraid of a spirit that would lead us to place restrictions on the work of others, lest we hinder the advance of the message of truth."<sup>16</sup>

Leaders who have "in the past allowed such a spirit to control them" "need to repent." Their lack of conversion has "sadly hurt the work."

. . . for the Holy Spirit cannot work with them while they refuse to acknowledge His counsel and control. He cannot use the men who employ the trust He has imposed upon them as an oppressive power to close the lips that He has opened."<sup>17</sup>

She wrote that God is leading His people. The man "who exercises the power to permit or to forbid, as his judgment may indicate, has given a representation of an unsanctified disposition." Under his influence, she penned:

The churches will be left powerless, if they are educated to obey the dictates of finite men instead of obeying the leadings of God. They must not be made to feel that before they can engage in any enterprise, they must first obtain permission of men. God bids me say, Cease from man, whose breath is in his nostrils, for

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<sup>12</sup> (SPTb11, 31-0) June 18, 1907

<sup>13</sup> LLM 221. See also LLM 323-324 regarding the nature of education churches receive from the exercise of "arbitrary authority."

<sup>14</sup> LLM 221

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 11:28-29.

<sup>16</sup> MR 311, p. 34

<sup>17</sup> MR 311, p. 34

wherein is he to be accounted for? Am not I to be consulted? Are finite, impulsive human agencies to have the control of My chosen ones?"<sup>18</sup>

Jesus and Moses both exhibited warm appreciation for spirit-guided workers regardless of whether or not they formed part of the central government of God's people.

Both reproved their associates' tendencies to forbid unauthorized activities.

Jesus said that "there is no man" that can lightly contradict himself by fighting what he pretends to support. This fundamental decentralizing principle holds true today. Administrators need not concern themselves with elements that will, by the very nature of their professed church support, credit or discredit themselves.

"Forbid him not," Jesus says. He can not harm you without harming himself. And as I have given you no authority to forbid him, there is nothing to be gained from assuming an oversight of his activities. Let him alone.

These principles strike at the heart of the mystery of iniquity. They assassinate the exercise of kingly power in the church. In the Adventist movement these ideals have been institutionalized under the guidance of God's Messenger to the remnant.

The opening of non-centralized organizations, such as the college at Madison discussed above, gave rise to a host of experiences where the question of authority had to be addressed. God's answers, through Ellen White, shed so much light in North America that self-supporting ministries flourished here.

She encouraged this lay movement to move forward humbly—without concerning itself with getting permission or "sanction." She asked church leaders to "encourage" members to take up work in new fields without worrying regarding the channeling of finances.

Let me tell you, if your heart is in the work, and you have faith in God, you need not depend upon the sanction of any minister or any people; if you go right to work in the name of the Lord, in a humble way doing what you can to teach the truth, God will vindicate you. If the work had not been so restricted by an impediment here, and an impediment there, and on the other side an impediment, it would have gone forward in its majesty.<sup>19</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists are doing a great and good work; let no man's hand be raised to hinder his brother. . .<sup>20</sup>

## **Patterns of Encroachment**

One historian summarized church history as the record of encroachments of ecclesiastical power and of man's efforts to resist those encroachments. He narrates how the apostolic Roman church labored to raise churches in adjacent fields and towns. These new congregations naturally looked to the Roman believers for answers to their questions and resolutions to their spiritual perplexities.

This polite granting of natural deference to an equal soon descended into a demanded submission from subordinates.<sup>21</sup> This pattern of helping-now-haughty-tomorrow has been repeated often in history.

But if [a man] is continually appealed to for advice, he is in danger of thinking that he cannot err, and that he is capable of judging the cases of his brethren, and in this way he brings peril upon the church. Spirituality will wane under an influence of this kind, and the knowledge of God's will, will become more and more indistinct, while the sayings of men become of more and more importance in the eyes of the people. In this way God is dishonored, and spiritual discernment is lost.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus foresaw and worked to forestall this development. He modeled servant administration. The authority that others marked in His life was a teaching authority.

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<sup>18</sup> LLM 323-324

<sup>19</sup> GCB 4-3-1901

<sup>20</sup> SPM 421-422

<sup>21</sup> D'Aubigne, History of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Book 1, Chapter 1 [check reference!]

<sup>22</sup> RH 8-14-1894

"For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."<sup>23</sup>

Not as the scribes. In other words, Jesus taught without depending on support from leading commentators and respected scholars. He spoke the truth in love and left it to recommend itself to the conscience of his hearers. His authority was manifest in the exercise of his right to teach.

That authorization to preach is the same authority He has commissioned to his delegated messengers. While twelve were contending regarding who would hold high administrative positions, he was preparing to illustrate the non-compulsory nature of Christian administration. He demanded no reply to his unanswered queries regarding their dispute. Rather, he passed by their noncompliance and called them to pay attention.

And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus denied that the authority to teach was coupled with the authority to condemn unbelievers. Condemnation would wait for the judgment. Truth itself would prosecute the case.

And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.<sup>25</sup>

### **Pastoral Authority**

Pastors that feel that they are authorized to guide their church boards as a captain guides a ship, or to penalize dissenters as the military penalizes insubordination, find no defense of their position in Christ's teaching.

One church leader in apostolic times felt he could manage his local church with an iron hand. He felt he had a right to disfellowship those that disagreed with his positions.

He refused to grant appeals to the authoritative teaching of the apostles. Under his direction his church became congregational in polity and autocratic in administration. He had a bad case of the "forbid them" tendency.

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.<sup>26</sup>

Diotrephes represents a large class. These pastors fail to recognize the authority of the congregation to manage its own affairs and to submit to the sisterhood of churches. They confuse their right to teach the Word with a right to demand submission to their teaching.

While they treat some conscientious souls with severity they are, themselves, flaunting their disregard for the policies of the organized church that encompasses them.<sup>27</sup>

The bylaws of the properly organized subsidiaries of the General Conference place the highest authority in the constituency.<sup>28</sup> This is true for all levels of church governance including the local church. The pastor serves this constituency, but he does not rule it. It is authorized legally and Biblically to handle its own issues of discipline, order, worship, and finance. He is authorized to teach. The constituency is authorized to act.

Autocratic pastors, or those that feel they are authorized by conference administration to bring a church into line, should understand this principle. These could be benefited by an understanding of why ministers are authorized to

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 7:29

<sup>24</sup> Mark 9:33-36

<sup>25</sup> John 12:47-48

<sup>26</sup> 3 John 9-10

<sup>27</sup> Some radical churches disregard General Conference policy in regard to ordaining women, employing homosexual pastors, and regarding the living equivalent pay-scale. But I refer to none of these in this paragraph. See the next paragraph in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Check the accuracy of this statement! Get a reference!

teach. Authority, or power, in the Bible is granted as a means to an end. The responsibilities that God grants are always accompanied with sufficient resources of authority and means for their accomplishment.

The state, for example, is responsible to protect its citizens from attack and oppression and to restrain the evil doers from disturbing the peace. To accomplish this task it must have military and police power. And so these have been granted to states. For similar reasons parents have been given authority to discipline and to regulate their home.

The church is responsible to train and nurture its members and to take the gospel to the world. To realize this end it must have authority to collect means, to teach members, and to discipline itself.

If pastors were responsible to make their flock choose the right, they would be granted authority to trample the conscience. But their responsibility is to guide. They are to entreat their flock to obey the truth. They are to be models for their flocks to imitate. They are to see themselves as shepherds—not rulers.

Obey them that guide you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.<sup>29</sup>

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder . . . Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.<sup>30</sup>

Will pastors become personally responsible for the decisions eventually made by those members that they have helped, enabled, or encouraged in ministry? A faulty answer to this question has created an unhealthy caution. While we must not encourage open sinners and blatant heretics, less we become partakers of their evil deeds, we can not well go to the other extreme.

To make a pastor responsible for "permitting" a private Bible study fellowship that becomes aberrant is to make God responsible for enabling the wicked men in the world by the gifts of rain and sunshine. When Jesus said "go with him twain" the Savior did not make men guilty of the abominations carried out by the Roman government they would be voluntarily serving with the second mile.

The limit of our responsibility measures the limit of our authority. As we are not accountable for secondary causes and third party decisions, we have no authority to regulate them.

The authority we do have, to teach, can not be divorced from our sacred duty to care for the flock. God abhors those shepherds who do otherwise.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Pastors and Church administrators have before them the stories of Eldad and Medad under Moses. They may read of Diotrephes. The example of Jesus saying "forbid them not" and of Peter urging them not to be as "Lords over God's heritage." God forbids forbidding.

We are authorized to use our influence for the right. We may counsel and suggest plans. But the authority of a man's conscience over his own life is beyond the reach of our delegated authority. The will of the church board trumps the will of the pastor in terms of administrative power. The will of the world church in representative session trumps that of the church board and of the local man. But when either exercises authority in lines that have not been granted to it by God, their authority in those lines is nothing.<sup>32</sup>

There is danger that patterns of bossy administration and thickening regulations will prompt the Spirit of God to make a radical decision.<sup>33</sup> Let us do what we can to prevent it by "being ensamples to the flock."

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<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 13:17, margin

<sup>30</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-4

<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34

<sup>32</sup> Romans 13:1-2— "to the higher power"

<sup>33</sup> "If the cords are drawn much tighter, if the rules are made much finer, if men continue to bind their fellow-laborers closer and closer to the commandments of men, many will be stirred by the Spirit of God to break every shackle, and assert their liberty in Christ Jesus. . . . And no human being shall be permitted to prescribe my liberty or entrench upon the perfect freedom of my brethren, without hearing my voice lifted in protest against it." RH 7-23-1895