



Week #6: Abuse of Power in Pastoral Ministry

Prayer Before Studying Ethics:

Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, as you are king of majesty; and forgive all my sins that I have committed, both great and small; and bring me, if it is your will to heaven to live always with you.

--Richard Rolle

Power (δύναμις) In Biblical Literature

The Greek word for power (δύναμις) is related to a verbal root which means “able to.” So one who has power is able to do something. (Thus, for example, the powers of sight and hearing are the abilities to see and hear.)

- One type of power to do things is
 - the ability to exert effective or superior force or
 - exercise dominion and rule over persons and things.(The Hebrew word *kôach* has a similar range of meanings but lays more emphasis upon the idea of superior force.)

Power in the Ancient Mediterranean World

In the ancient Mediterranean world discussions of power can often be seen addressing three fundamental questions:

- (1) How is power mediated? Through what persons or things?
- (2) What role is played by acts of power (δυνάμεις) in this mediation?
 - (a) Do people who have power need to display it on a regular basis? Is this how persons who have power are to be identified?
 - (b) Do all people who appear to perform acts of power actually have this power?
- (3) Most importantly, how can one access this power or share in this power and use, control or benefit from it, without being harmed or controlled by it? (E.g. rituals of power such as blessing, cursing and sorcery)

Power in Biblical Literature: The Power of Yahweh Contrasted with Human Power and the Powers Ascribed to False Gods

(1) In the OT this power is primarily associated with and claimed by the one personal God who has exclusive power over the natural world and the unfolding of world history.

The OT repeatedly refers to the exercise of God’s power--e.g.

- in creation (Is. 40:26; Jer. 10:12; 27:5; 32:17)
- in the events of the Exodus (Ex. 9:16; 15:6,13; 32:11; Dt. 3:24) such as
 - the contest of power with Pharaoh
 - the deliverance at the Red Sea
 - the gift of land
 - God giving his people a purpose within the broader world
- God subduing his enemies (Job 36:19),

- God delivering his people (Is. 63:1).

(2) The OT also emphasizes that in comparison with God's power, human strength and abilities are nothing (2 Chron. 20:6; Job 37:23; Ps. 33:16; Amos 2:14), a point that is repeatedly stressed in the Book of Job and constitutes one of the main themes of that book. The wise are therefore those who rely not upon their own (limited) strength and abilities, but on God's (unlimited) power (Job 36:22; Is. 40:31; Mic. 3:8; Zech. 4:6) and call on God when they are in need or threatened (Is. 10:33; Neh. 1:10).

(3) In the OT God also forbids them to turn to other sources of power to try to meet their felt needs or solve their pressing problems. For example, the stars or the deities associated with them in ancient Near Eastern religions are associated with power (2 Kings. 7:16; 21:3,5; 23:4-5). Israel is therefore forbidden to consult them, seek benefits from them or worship them (cf. Dt. 4:19; note the contrast made in vv. 19 and 20). (This is also part of the reason why the OT repeatedly depicts God boldly acting and speaking in and through nature--to emphasize that he is the lord over nature and that it is he, not the various nature gods of ancient Near Eastern religions, that has sovereign authority over the forces of nature; cf. Ps. 29:4).

(4) The OT also speaks about a final (eschatological) deployment of God's power that will banish evil and every power that opposes God's rule (Is. 2:19; 40:10; Ez. 20:33). The means by which God will deploy this power and make its influence felt in the world is through the Messiah.

- Isaiah prophesied that the spirit of counsel and strength would rest upon the Messiah (11:2) and that he would tend his flock with the strength of the Lord (5:5). (Compare Jesus' application of Isaiah's prophetic words to himself in Lk. 4:18.)
- God's prophetic power will rest upon the Messiah, just as it guided and directed the prophets and caused them to speak (cf. Mic. 3:8).
 - Compare the account of Jesus' conception in Lk. 1:35, teaching ministry in Lk. 4:14, and ability to speak from God and authoritatively command/expel the powers of evil.
 - See Acts 10:38: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" and the description of Jesus as the "power of God" in 1 Cor. 1:24.
 - Note also the way that acts of power are to accredit Jesus' ministry in Mt. 11:20ff.; Jn. 3:2; 9:33; Acts 2:22, as well as evoke praise of God (Lk. 19:37) and saving trust in Jesus (Mt. 9:28).
 - This is also the context within which the Resurrection is to be understood--the power that God displays in Jesus is even greater than the power of death (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:26,55-57; 7:16; cf. Phil. 3:10).

(5) With the coming of the Messiah, there is a confrontation between God's power in Jesus and every other power which wants to set itself up independently of God or in opposition to God.

- E.g. Simon Magus claiming to be the “the Great Power of God” in Acts 8:9-10 (cf. his motive in v. 19); note the contrast with v.12 (Philip’s preaching about Jesus) and with 1 Cor. 1:24, where Jesus alone is “the power of God.”
- The risen Jesus is superior to every other power (Eph. 1:20-21; 1 Pet. 3:22; 1 Cor. 15:24) and these “powers” no longer have dominion or control over those who follow Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39).
- With the coming of Jesus, the resistance of the powers of evil to God’s rule intensifies (Rev. 13:2,4; 2 Thess. 2:9).

Power in Christian Leadership

Christian leadership is a position of power which can serve either Jesus and the Kingdom or the destructive powers which oppose God, so careful discernment is necessary.

- Paul’s witness to the cross of Christ (which appears a weak and foolish thing, but contains within it the fullness of God’s wisdom and power; cf. 1 Cor. 1:17-18,25,27; 2 Cor. 13:4; 12:9-10; 2 Tim. 1:7-8) gives Paul a far-reaching spiritual authority (cf. 2 Cor. 10:7-8; 2 Tim. 4:17), which he does not hesitate to use:
 - 1 Cor. 4:19-20 in dealing with arrogant members of the Corinthian congregation
 - 1 Cor. 5:3ff. in dealing with the incestuous man
- This Lord gave this authority to the leader to build up the community of believers and it must not be used with a severity which tears down (2 Cor. 13:10). Furthermore, are we using what power we have to help the weak become strong or are we using our power to keep them in a weaker or more dependent position?
- This power or authority is not absolute and does not inherently belong to the leader but is relative to Jesus’ own greater authority and is delegated to the leader for a specific purpose for a certain period of time until Jesus returns (Mk. 13:34-35).
- This delegated power must be used for the purposes for which it was given and within the boundaries within which it was intended to be used.
- This power may not be used
 - for the pastor’s own purposes or
 - for the pastor’s own benefit or gratification at the expense of those under the pastor’s care
 - as if it extended into situations and relationships beyond those for which it was specifically delegated.

Do we listen and invite honest, open discussion?

Are we transparent and non-defensive in receiving criticism?

Are we willing to admit it when we have crossed a line or wrongly handled a situation?

Do we carefully study an issue, talk with people who hold different opinions and consider new possibilities or are we relatively closed down?

Do we trade on differentials in power created by age, gender, race, perceived competence, etc. to push our own agenda or get our own way?

Do we trade favors, give gifts, etc. to build social capital so that we can use others’ consequent dependence to push our agenda or get our own way?

Power in Professional Ethics

Discuss the concept of “fiduciary responsibility” described in Gula, pp. 74-75: “we will exercise our authority in ways that will serve their need for seeking our pastoral service in the first place, and that we will not exploit their vulnerability but give greater preference to their best interests over our own.” Compare Batten’s previous and more succinct definition of “fiduciary duty” in professional ethics:

One should act “in a way that is worthy of the client’s trust and does not undermine those interests with respect to which the client consults him or her” and which constitute the reason why the client consults him or her.

(1) Authority can come from one’s *role* (or rather, the *office* of public teaching to which God has called one, this call having been externally recognized by the Church through discernment, examination and ordination).

- a. This is why we earlier cautioned against the dangers of dual roles (cf. Gula, pp. 80-85 on dual relationships)—one can use the power associated with Role A to achieve goals associated with Role B, even though these goals conflicts with the responsibilities, duties and goals associated with Role A. (Role A is primary, serves their best interests, and is the previously agreed basis of the relationship).
- b. This is why we also noted the boundaries that needed to be preserved and the potential dangers that needed to be recognized when the pastor contracts friendships with members of one’s congregation. The pastoral role can never be reduced to a simple friendship, nor can friendship be substituted for the pastoral role (cf. Gula, p. 77)

(2) Authority can come from *knowledge*. Pastors often have private knowledge of the intimate details of people’s lives (and their darker side; see Tucker, *Primer for Pastors*, pp. 99-100). Cf. our earlier discussion of the need for confidentiality and the vulnerabilities created by disclosure.

The Notion of “Spiritual Abuse”:

When Christian Leaders Use the Power Associated With Their Position To Shame, Manipulate and Coerce Those Under Their Care For the Leader’s Own Benefit or Purposes

Within the past 15 years, a number of works have been written by evangelicals to address the misuse of pastoral authority within evangelical churches. This literature generally describes this problem rather unhelpfully in terms of “spiritual abuse,” a new term that does not have a clearly defined meaning or boundaries.

Probably the most helpful way to define the problem is to look at

- Jeri’s story (excerpted from David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991, pp. 17-18) and
- John and Mary’s story (excerpted from Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House 2001, pp. 79-83)

and try to define inductively the features of the story that are morally problematic. (See the discussion question sheet and the case study handouts.)

Abuse of Power by Pastors= Using one’s position of power, authority or responsibility to attempt to control another’s life,

- demanding conformity and

- rewarding obedient performance while
- discouraging questions,
- promoting unhealthy dependency, and
- marginalizing and penalizing resistance
 - Shaming:
 - a questioning of authority is treated as a questioning of God,
 - an offense against authority is treated as an offense against God

It is best to avoid practices that can be a slippery slope, e.g. making decisions for persons seeking help who are vulnerable or in crisis (moving the other toward the desired end).

One should also be exceedingly cautious (and acutely aware of one's own motives and felt needs) when providing pastoral care or pastoral counseling for persons who

- incline toward dependence,
- are highly suggestible or easily led/manipulated or
- come from traditional family or sectarian community backgrounds that assume and promote a strong power differential in relationships.

See

- Jeren Rowell, *What's a Pastor to Do? The Good and Difficult Work of Ministry* [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004], pp. 33-34 and
- the quotation from *Commitments of the Shepherd*, p. 9 in Kurt Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997], p. 72
- Kenneth E. Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology and Their Application* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), pp. 206 (bottom)-207 (top) may also be worth reflecting upon

Abuse of power can take place even where the doctrines and teaching of the church are formally sound.

(1) This type of improper practice is nonetheless potentially even more serious than false doctrine, since it not only

- offers a false interpretation of the world, salvation, etc.,

but also

- promotes patterns of acting and responding which are destructive of self and others (concealing; deceiving; manipulating through shame, guilt and fear of loss or humiliation) and *this sets a model for what God's character is imagined to be like.*
- cuts one off from the relationships with others outside the community that could raise important questions and thus allow the kind of enquiry by which persons grow intellectually, morally and spiritually and more nearly approach the actual Truth of God.

(2) There is also something very strange and deficient about a life where agents are constantly acting out of motives to please unsatisfied others whose approval or honor they value or whose rejection or criticism they fear. The motives here are too two-dimensional and it also makes one's primary dependence to be upon flawed, limited, sinful human beings (whom I serve to obtain a benefit for myself or avoid harm to

myself), rather than upon God (whom I serve because it is supremely fitting and natural for me to do this).

Abuse of Staff Members by the Senior Pastor—

Note that the abusive pastors described by Greenfield tend to have some common characteristics. They tend to

- isolate themselves in certain ways
- have difficulty trusting others
- have a lack of real empathy
- find value in competing for status, so that power (or the resources that lead to and enable it) become
- maintain a certain distance in interpersonal relationships
- intermittently blame the other, while refusing to take responsibility themselves.

As a supplement to Greenfield's discussion of the psychopathology of abusive ministers (compulsive, narcissistic, paranoid, etc.), it is interesting to compare the diagnostic tests given in Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), pp. 90-93, 100-103, 110-113, 124-127, 132-135. It is worth taking these diagnostic tests oneself (not just skimming them), not only because it can help one to discern some borderline tendencies in oneself, but also because working through the test can give one the ability to recognize these tendencies in others.

Abuse of Pastors by Congregation Members— Attempts by congregation members to control, manipulate or oust the pastor or to undermine the pastor's authority, failing to understand or acknowledge that the pastor serves by virtue of God's calling to a particular congregation, not by human whim or independent human choice. Ministry is service to the whole congregation not a basis for competition with others or something to be in competition with (so that one can deal with one's insecurities or lust for power and control by merely human means).

Case study: Greenfield, "Prince of Peace Fighting Church"

Stalking and Sexual Harassment by a Lay Leader/Congregational Representative—

Case study: Karen A. McClintock, *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations: A Resource for Leaders*, pp. 70-72

(see also *ibid.*, pp. 97-98; note that this is different from the preceding cases—here the abuse of the pastor takes place not on the basis of some recognized role or position within the church but simply by the persistent assertion of an absolute claim to power over the other persons, with the threat of possible harm lurking in the background)

Power Inequity and Undue Influence in Intercultural Work

Alex Akulli's case study

Discussion Questions for Ethics Week #6: Abuse of Power
(Shaming, Manipulation and Attempts to Coerce and Control in Ways that Promote the Leader's Interests at the Expense of the Follower's Basic Interests and Well-Being)

(A) Jeri's Story: (excerpted from David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991, pp. 17-18)

(1) In looking at the following questions, try to define inductively the features of the story that are morally problematic:

(a) What is Jeri's account of her struggles?

(b) How does Jeri's pastor approach her problem? What is his diagnosis and why? What relationship is fundamental in leading him to this conclusion? Whose honor is at stake here and why?

(2) What underlying models of leadership, authority, control and honor vs. shame are at work here? How are these related to the admission of weakness, illness and failure by a member of the pastor's congregation?

(3) Can spiritual rebellion be a legitimate object of pastoral concern and counsel? How would one properly define "spiritual rebellion"? What would "spiritual rebellion against one's pastor" look like? What would be its identifying characteristics and are these present in Jeri's story?

(4) Is it ever legitimate for a pastor to require unquestioning obedience from the members of congregation? If so, when and why? If not, why not?

(B) John and Mary's Story

(Excerpted from Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House 2001, pp. 79-83)

(1) What is John's understanding of the nature of spiritual relationships and spiritual commitment?

(2) What is Pastor Doug's understanding of the nature of spiritual relationships and spiritual commitment?

(2) What concepts of authority, inclusion (belonging, acceptance and approval vs. rejection) and honor vs. shame underlie this concept of "loyalty"?

(3) If God has unlimited authority and can rightfully demand from one an unlimited commitment, how much of that authority is conferred upon those who serve as shepherds of Christ's flock?

(4) Can disagreement with a pastor ever be legitimately seen as spiritual rebellion against God? What would be its identifying characteristics and are these present in Mary's story?

(5) If one of the members of your congregation refused counseling with you, under what circumstances would you consider this to be unacceptable?

(6) How would relationships of collegiality and accountability with a pastoral colleague or episcopal supervision have potentially assisted Pastor Doug?

(OVER)

(C) Lebacqz and Driskill: Conceptual Reflection and Critical Analysis of Methodology

- (1) How useful are Johnson and VanVonderen's (p. 133) and the Linns' (pp. 133-134) explanations of why spiritual abuse is bad? How helpful are their proposed models of what constitutes spiritual health?
- (2) How helpful are the models of addiction and recovery used by Langone and others?