

## Authority and Power

Almost everyone has power over at least some others. To pretend otherwise can be extremely dangerous because it can lead to the abuse of the power we have but refuse to recognise.

Jesus had power. He exercised power over disease, over evil spirits and even over the weather. He taught in a new way and with an authority that even his enemies recognised. He called people to follow him and they left their families and occupations to do so. People were amazed at what they saw and heard. Moreover, Jesus gave his disciples both authority and power. In his lifetime he sent them out to preach, heal and cast out evil spirits. On leaving them, he told them that they would do even greater works than he had done (John 14:12). And that is just what happened. When his disciples began to preach, large numbers of people were converted (Acts 2:41, 4:4, 5:14). Their words confounded their enemies (Acts 4:13-14). The miracles they performed caused awe and wonder (Acts 2:43, 3:9-10, 5:14-16, 8:6-8, 9:32-43, 19:11-12). They even prayed for greater power and saw their prayers answered (Acts 4:23-31).

A reading of the New Testaments suggests, therefore, that leaders in the Christian Church should expect to exercise extraordinary power. And always, as in the case of Jesus and the apostles, this power is to be used for good: to set people free from the control of sin, to enable them to grow and develop, to help them to solve problems and live fuller lives. The church should not be afraid of exercising power. Jesus promised it (Acts 1:8) and it is our most important tool for bringing in God's Kingdom.

However, while exercising great power, Jesus also taught his followers to beware the abuse of power. The practice of heathen rulers, who dominate and oppress, was not to be theirs (Mark 10:42-43). When it came to power and greatness, their example was to be a little child (Matthew 18:1-5). Their attitude was always to be that of a servant (Mark 10:43-44, Luke 17:7-10). And Jesus not only taught but modelled the attitude he commended, living a life of service and teaching his disciples to do the same (Mark 10:45, Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 25:34-40, John 13:1-17, Philippians 2:5-11). Possibly, the relative lack of power seen in the Church today may have something to do with the lack of this servant attitude.

### What is Power?

But what is power? Power belongs to the field of human relationships. It is the ability to influence people: to change their minds, their attitudes or their behaviour. Power is ubiquitous in human relationships: in every group of people there are those with greater and those with less power, those who influence and those who are influenced. Part of the process of belonging to any group, including the church, is finding out, consciously or subconsciously, where we stand in the hierarchy of

power. For those who are insecure, who need to control others for their own well-being, this can cause problems for themselves and those around them. That is why a church needs to be a place of healing, where our needs for influence and control can be confronted and dealt with.

Power comes in many guises and has many different sources. Here are just a few of the most common:

1. Legitimate authority. We will consider the subject of authority in the next section of this introduction. One of the most common sources of power is a position that gives one the right to give orders and expect them to be carried out. Legitimate authority is found in virtually every sphere of life, although in the family it is currently the subject of considerable debate.
2. Control of rewards. This is perhaps the second most pervasive source of power. The kinds of rewards which can be a source of power or influence vary widely. Money is fairly obvious, largely though not exclusively confined to the sphere of paid employment. In a church, a person who is known to give large sums of money can exercise considerable influence, especially when he or she makes it known that they either support or oppose certain courses of action. Another type of reward is position, and the power of patronage or appointment is considerable. Exercised well, it can be a means of enabling and encouraging people to grow and develop. Then there is affirmation. Parents exercise power over their children by the giving or withholding of affirmation and so do congregations over their vicars or ministers. Fourthly, pastoral care. Those with the skills and position to provide pastoral care thereby exercise power over those receiving it. These skills provide power to help others and enable them to grow. But the activity of counselling is also hedged about with ethical guidelines to prevent the abuse of power.
3. Expertise. A person with a specialist skill, especially one in short supply, is in a position to exercise considerable power. In churches, this can apply particularly to such people as organists and treasurers. The power of a minister is considerably enhanced by his or her knowledge of the Bible and ability to teach it. Exercised well, this ability is vital for the growth of the church. On a PCC, the person who knows the minutiae of procedure can be in a position either to oil the wheels of a discussion or to use their knowledge to get their own way.
4. Persuasive ability. The ability to see the issues, a gift for the right words, wisdom to know the right time to speak and when to remain silent all help to decide who has greater influence than others.
5. Stronger will. Some people have greater confidence in decision-making and perhaps greater experience in making decisions and carrying them through. Others, perhaps influenced by their own past history, lack this confidence.
6. Reputation. Well-known Christian speakers and leaders exercise far greater influence than others less well-known. It has been known for people to share

with their vicars as a wonderful insight from the ministry of a visiting preacher the very thing he or she has been patiently teaching for years!

## Power and authority

Authority is the twin concept to power. Jesus demonstrated not only power but also authority (Mark 1:27, 2:9-11). He was a man "under authority", and recognised as such by those with eyes to see (Matthew 8:8-9). We see this in his practice of regular prayer, through which he kept in touch with his Father's will (Mark 1:35-38). He himself said that he only did what he saw his Father doing (John 5:19,36) and spoke only the words that his Father gave him to speak (John 8:45-47, 17:8) When he sent out his disciples it was not only with power but with authority (Luke 9:1, Matthew 28:18-20). Like Jesus, they too were "under authority".

But how is authority related to power? If power is the *ability* to influence people, authority is *permission* to influence people. This permission may be given either from "above", in the shape of the person appointing us to a certain position, or from "below", from the people themselves. The authority of the local minister comes from both above and below. It is given by the Bishop who licenses the minister to a specific ministry; it is given by the congregation who selects the minister for training and welcomes that ministry.

The ideal situation is where power and authority coincide. A person influences those people and only those people he or she has authority to influence and only to the extent to which he or she has permission. Thus, the responsible exercise of power includes deliberately refraining from influencing people beyond the permission they have given or the limits to which we are entitled. Achieving this ideal is not easy. Power and authority can be out of balance when either influence exceeds authority or when authority exceeds the ability to influence.

One example of the former is the authoritarian use of power. This may take the form of decisions made without due consultation. It often causes resentment and almost always disables others, who are prevented from exercising their own legitimate influence. Authoritarian leadership can leave a legacy, not only in the church but also in secular organisations, which requires positive measures to correct and heal. Another form of the excess of power over authority is manipulation, where someone attempts to use underhand, hidden or illegitimate means to influence the decisions of a group or the conduct of others.

Equally damaging can be situations where authority exceeds power, where the designated leader is unable or unwilling to exercise the authority he or she has been given. Situations of "laissez-faire" leadership can lead to frustration and division as the leader vacillates or comes under the influence of informal advisers who are not accountable to the group as a whole.

## Levels of leadership

Leadership is the exercise of power and authority together. The better we recognise our own sources of power – the ability to influence those around us – and the sources

of influence others have over us, the better equipped we will be to lead. The better we recognise the extent and the limits of our authority, the more responsible will be our leadership. The better we are able to co-ordinate our power and our authority, the more successful will be our leadership, and the more it will build up and strengthen the church and the individuals who are part of it.

Much of this is summed up by Christian pastor and leadership guru John Maxwell in his book *Developing the Leader Within You*. In the first chapter, Maxwell sets out five "levels" of leadership, as follows:

1. **Position.** The leader relies mainly on the authority of their position. They expect people to comply because they are the boss. This level of leadership can never be bypassed and it is important always to recognise the leader's legitimate sphere of authority. When a leader is newly appointed or a leadership group newly formed, especially in the case of a new minister previously unknown to the congregation, positional authority is all they have, and a congregation may welcome the early exercise of this authority as proof that the leader is prepared to lead. However, in a voluntary organisation like the church positional authority is never enough in the longer term. If the leader or the leadership group continue to rely on positional authority alone, people will end up doing no more than is required and will grow resentful even of this.
2. **Permission.** Permissive leadership is based on trust. Here, the congregation give the leaders permission to lead because they trust that the leaders know them and care for their well-being. Authority from above is now combined with authority from below. This comes about as the leaders build relationships with those they lead, get to know them, and exercise their leadership in ways that are responsive to their needs and desires. As Maxwell sums it up, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."
3. **Production.** If permissive leadership is primarily people-centred, productive leadership is primarily task-centred. The level of production is reached when the organisation has the feel that it is going places, when people know their place and where they fit and when their contribution is recognised and valued. Productive leadership will be enhanced by clear lines of accountability and by the availability of training and encouragement to undertake it. The values of the Investors in People organisation are a very good summary of what this level of leadership is all about.
4. **People development.** There is a higher level of leadership still. This is where people are willing to follow the leader or leaders because they recognise that they themselves are being helped to grow and develop under their leadership. An important test of effective leadership is whether the leader is capable of developing others. If they are, they can expect great loyalty from those who recognise the effect of the leader on their lives.
5. **Personhood.** The highest level of all, according to Maxwell, is the leader who just "is" a leader, to the extent that they very quickly inspire trust and

confidence from those they are called to lead. We can imagine that such a person has all the lessons of the first four levels well and truly integrated into their habitual practice. However, says Maxwell, very few people reach this level. Most of us have to keep working hard at developing our leadership ability!

Apart from understanding the different levels of leadership, the most important thing Maxwell wishes us to learn is that the leader cannot skip a level. However skilful the leader or leaders, they can never exceed their legitimate sphere of authority without damaging the relationship with those whom they lead. Leaders will never achieve the level of "productive" leadership without building a base of "permission" from those they lead. For example, a leader who wants to commend a "vision" to the congregation must first take time building up the trust of that congregation by showing genuine love and care. Even better, the "vision" needs to grow out of that love and a deep understanding of the congregation. Attempts to skip the level of "permission" often lead to people being valued solely for their contribution to the realisation of the "vision" and this can lead to manipulation and spiritual abuse.

When we look at Jesus, it is not difficult to see that he exemplifies all Maxwell's levels, including the fifth. He recognised his authority and its limits. He showed deep love and compassion for all with whom he came into contact. He enlisted his followers in the project of building God's Kingdom, trained and empowered them for the task they had to perform and transformed their lives in the process. Jesus used his power always and only for the good of others, never for himself. He called himself a servant and taught his disciples that the greatest in his Father's Kingdom must be a servant to all. Our greatest resource in seeking to emulate Jesus' use of power will be the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of power, love and self-control (2 Timothy 1:7), given to enable us to live like Jesus and exercise his power in his way.