

## Leadership and Power

Very few people set out in Christian leadership with any intention of abusing power or position. Sadly, however, some do. In this session we will explore the downwards journey, considering how we can be tempted into illegitimate leadership and pastoral practice by using our influence and relationships to avoid accountability and exceed our authority.

**Marcus Honeysett** is the director of Living Leadership. Living Leadership trains, disciples, and provides soul care for church leaders in the UK and beyond through its networks and associates, and by serving other ministries who share the same aims. Living Leadership provides mentoring, residentials, courses, online opportunities for nurture, and a leadership school in partnership with Above Bar Church in Southampton. Its vision is for flourishing leaders in disciple-making churches. Marcus is married to Ros. They have a football-mad six-year-old.

### I. Introduction: False Prophets, Shepherds Who Feed on the Sheep

A. Ezekiel 34:2-4

B. Acts 20:28-31

Leaders can and do go wrong. How can we spot the danger signs in ourselves and others?

### II. Terms:

A. Power = the ability to act

B. Authority = the right to act

### III. 5 Foundations of Biblical Leadership

A. It is a spiritual gift for administering God's grace, for the common good (Rom. 12:8)

B. The point is building up the body in maturity, love and effectiveness (Eph. 4)

C. We do this by working with people for their progress and joy in the faith, so their joy in Jesus overflows (Phil. 1:25-26)

- D. In practice this means: teaching, shepherding, modelling and spiritual parenting (1 Thess. 1-2)
  - E. We lead out of weakness, not strength, to demonstrate the sufficiency of God's grace (2 Cor. 12)
- IV. Four features that help ensure leaders remain godly
- A. Accountability
  - B. Plurality of leaders
  - C. Transparency
  - D. Embodiment in the church community
- V. A Spectrum of Leadership Behaviours
- A. Legitimate and legitimated leadership
    - 1. Formal, legitimate authority
    - 2. Informal, relational authority
  - B. Illegitimate leadership
    - 1. Illegitimate other-serving authority
    - 2. Illegitimate self-serving authority
    - 3. The most serious abuse
- VI. 4 Assumptions
- A. Leaders have authority and power
  - B. The boundaries on the spectrum are indistinct

C. When we cross from legitimate to illegitimate and it is not challenged or questioned, illegitimate leadership becomes an accepted part of church practice

D. I am NOT talking about:

1. teaching truths from God's word that someone doesn't like
2. situations where a person needs to be dismissed for persistent sin, character flaws or inability to work with a team
3. situations where people don't like elder-led church governance

## VII. Coercive Leadership Practices

Coercive leaders dominate and dismantle structures to ensure control by:

A. Subtle control

- creating dependency on themselves with people who allow them greater access to authority, or whom they can put in positions of influence and subsequently control

B. More obvious strategies for control of structures of organisational governance and authority

- controlling all boards, agenda and church programmes
- privately arranging predefined outcomes with close associates
- manipulating preferred candidates into leadership positions and removing unwanted ones
- establishing executive groups that remove accountability from legitimate bodies such as trustees or elders, disempowering them from fulfilling their oversight role (this is not a general comment on teams and teamwork but on the specific case of groups being used to avoid scrutiny)
- insisting on obedience to supposed God-given mandates
- refusing evaluation of leaders' work by others

Coercive leaders dominate and dismantle people to ensure control by:

A. More subtle control tactics for marginalising opposition

- Silencing others by denying they have the necessary insight or experience to contribute
- Manipulation through easy apology, insincere praise or suggestions that they have merely been misconstrued
- Passive aggression
- Hyper-sensitivity in areas where leaders have made mistakes
- Inability to admit sin and failure, apologise or repent (for fear of reputational damage)

B. More aggressive means of domination and dismantling

The following strategies become more obviously designed to actively diminish people by wounding, traumatising or eliminating them. A useful acronym from the world of psychology and trauma studies is **DARVO**. The aggressor:

- Denies that anything is wrong
- Attacks the challenger
- Reverses Victim and Offender

Leaders empower themselves by:

- Making themselves inaccessible except to the inner ring
- Evading standard processes and protocols, especially ones to do with accountability: annual reviews; negligence, grievance or conflict of interest policies
- Ensuring any evaluation or investigation of themselves is neither independent nor impartial
- Actively covering tracks, lying, deceit

Leaders destabilise others by:

- Isolating and siloing people so they can more easily dominated; discouraging or forbidding others from speaking to them
- Ridiculing or silencing opposition
- Attacking credibility, labelling those who don't buy into vision as lacking vision, faith, commitment or competence
- Expressions of anger or disappointment that put people down and humiliate
- Blame-shifting: "I'm so disappointed you would think that". i.e. it's you, not me. You misunderstand the situation or me, you lack the necessary facts or judgment
- Implying the victim is the guilty party: "I'm so sad that the relationship with that person has broken down, and it's their fault not mine"
- Refusing access to communication channels for those who wish to express concerns to the church
- Ostracising people who express concerns. Bad leaders know that if they ignore people and refuse to engage with them for long enough, they will probably give up and go away eventually. This is preferable to removing them or otherwise overtly causing them to leave, because it allows the leader to disclaim responsibility afterwards, placing it instead on those who have left. The real reasons for their departure can be airbrushed out and their concerns removed from the record
- Making life hard for their family and friends
- Gaslighting
- Casting doubt on people's character, emotional stability or sanity, or stigmatising them as ill
- Non-disclosure agreements

## VIII. How to Spot and Prevent Misuse of Power and Position

A. What safeguards would be strong enough to guard you and others against your worst self?

B. Find ways to:

1. Make it easy for others to tell you if you are going wrong
2. Operate with personal and organizational accountability that actually works
3. Insist on procedures, policies and practices that expose you as a leader to the light
4. Be clear with the church and its officers that you are not immune to the dangers

## IX. Questions for Self-Review

What safeguards would be strong enough to guard you and others against your worst self?

- Do I genuinely put the interests of others first, considering them better than myself? (Phil. 2:3-4)
- Do I co-opt people who will support me unthinkingly? Or those who are dependent upon me or in an unequal power dynamic that would make it unlikely they could ever question my decisions?
- Do I welcome review of my leadership?
- Do I insist that church policies and procedures are strong and clear enough to hold me accountable?
- Do I willingly recuse myself when I have a conflict of interest?
- Do I make myself transparent with team and church officers?
- Do I enfranchise and equip people to play a full part in a team, or am I threatened when others are more gifted or competent than me?
- Do I have to appear successful to the church to protect myself from feelings of vulnerability or inadequacy?
- Am I ever tempted to lie to cover up mistakes or deceive in order to disguise how I am trying to get my own way?

- Am I ever tempted to use DARVO defences to protect myself? (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender)
- If someone raises a serious issue about my leadership practice or integrity is my instinct to listen, to excuse myself or to silence or refuse to interact with them? Will they get a fair hearing or not?
- In such circumstances would I welcome impartial and independent scrutiny, and possibly arbitration? Or would I try to determine how adjudication processes operate, making sure any investigation is biased to my own advantage?