

CO-MISSION! PLANTING

Power, authority and accountability

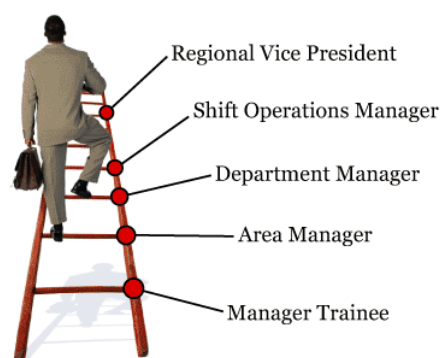
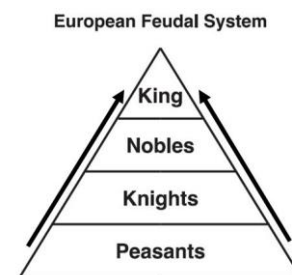
Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb: Searching for Jesus' Path of Power in a Church that Has Abandoned It* (Thomas Nelson, 2017)

<https://youtu.be/hV7s2ieMzT4>

Worldly power

In the OT we see the main pattern of the worldly leader in the ancient world is that they place heavy burdens on the people, they are selfish takers, they work a pyramid model of extracting and accumulating resources (1 Sam. 8:11-14; Neh. 5:15; Eccl. 5:8-9). In this model, leadership is personal privilege and power to make things harder for those below you and better for yourself.

And today, we all naturally think in terms of hierarchies and that people 'further up' that hierarchy are more important / better off / higher status / higher worth / higher value than those 'lower down'.¹ It is a self-evidently good thing to be 'higher up'. We equate role with benefits and significance. Sarah Allen, discussing feminist demands for equal pay and equal representation in parliament, judiciary and business comments, "The premises underlying all [these] are: that women are valued only when they work in powerful jobs."²



Power in the church

Matt. 20:25-26

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (NIV)

Carson, comments that 'lord it over' is not a great translation. 'Exercise lordship' would be better (similarly at 1 Pet. 5:3). The point is not the manner or abuse of leadership but "that the very structures themselves cannot be transferred to relationships among his followers" (Carson, *Matt. 13-28, Expositor's Bible Commentary*). So Jesus is saying that *the whole idea* of people being 'above' other people, the pyramid model – that structure of society that is so normal in the world that it seems obvious – that should not be imported into the church.

Within the church there is authority. The elders are to "direct the affairs of the church" and there should be respect and submission to them (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17). However, in the church, authority and power undergo an inversion, a levelling, a relativizing, a restriction, a change of manner, means and purpose (compared to how power and authority are understood and practiced in the world).

¹ Duncan Olumbe, in his paper 'African Worldview: An Introduction' (2008): "the lack of the concept of equality in creation of man means that in the Primal worldview, status is a major issue. The kings, witchdoctors and elders are considered special and above the rest. And generally men occupied a higher status than women and children in several Primal societies." This is not a peculiarly African thing – it is a basic human thing.

² Everyday Sexism Revisited, *Evangelicals Now*, Dec. 2016. This is what gives such heat to the debate about women's ordination and complementarian marriage – through the world's 'lens' this is not only about whether women are being denied access to the 'benefits' of power but also whether women are 'worth' the same as men or are lesser beings.

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1. Inversion

“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44). Similarly, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted; the first will be last and the last first; unless you become like a little child; my power is made perfect in your weakness.” All our categories are turned upside down; all our definitions are redefined; all the connections we make between identity, authority and position are shaken. To go up is now to go down and vice versa. The pyramid is inverted and the leader is at the base of the V – serving, supporting, empowering those above him. To be the church leader is to get the ‘bottom job.’ As Goggin and Strobel say, in our heads we know all this but have we sat with it long enough to really feel the weight of it. Has the truth that ‘the Word in *weakness* is the way’ really sunk in?

2. Levelling

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah (Matt. 23:8-10). There is no career ladder in the kingdom. The Father and the Son have the ‘top job’ and then there is the brotherhood of believers. As Harrison Mungai has put it: “You’re never going to be promoted to be God.” There is the Lord of the harvest and then there are simply the workers in the harvest field (Matt. 9:38). Does that mean there’s no leadership or teaching or instructing in the church? There is, but it is of a completely different order to Jesus’ authority and teaching of us. When we teach and lead one another it is *horizontal* not vertical.³ We are all human beings of exactly equal worth. We are all depraved sinners and we are all justified by Christ alone. In creation and at the foot of the Cross we are all on the same level. We lead as *brothers* encouraging brothers to follow Christ’s leadership. We teach as brothers pointing brothers to Jesus and his words. And those who are not doing the leading or the teaching are equally valuable members of the body. The mouth is not greater than the feet or the ear (1 Cor. 12).⁴ The elders are addressed in 1 Peter 5 as a subset of the whole church of elect exiles addressed in 1 Peter 1. They are to shepherd the flock ‘amongst them’ (1 Pet. 5:2) – that is they are first sheep themselves, then they have a special stewardship and leadership role in respect to the other sheep.

One particular way that an unhealthy hierarchy can creep back in is through favouritism. “When there is a perception that some are ‘the favoured ones’ and others are not, danger lurks” (Christopher Ash). While we will need to have an inner circle in terms of leadership and communication, we must be very careful that this never contravenes 1 Tim. 5:21 “without partiality, do nothing out of favouritism” or gives the impression that some people matter more to us and other people and their opinions have less worth (cf. also James 2).

3. Relativizing

Kevin Vanhoozer, notes that the authority of humans is never absolute authority in the true sense. Only God is the author and has full authority.⁵ Any human authority is a derived, delegated, secondary authority or “authorization” (e.g. Rom. 13:1). “To be an authority is to be authorized by something or someone beyond oneself... To have authority is to exercise an office and to do so because someone authorized it.” (*Biblical Authority After Babel*, p. 86.⁶ Furthermore, authority in the church is a mediated authority – through the Word of God. In a quote that I can’t trace, someone said, “The model of authority in the New Testament church is not the congregation under the authority of the pastor but the pastor and the congregation under the Word of God.” You see this in Acts 17 where Paul refers (or defers) to the Scriptures as his authority and the Bereans then don’t take his word as the infallible word of the Man of God but check it against the real authority – the Word of God. It is this Word that has ultimate authority over lives and it is this Word which alone can really

³ <https://watumishiwaneno.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/going-horizontal/>.

⁴ Paul Tripp, in *A Dangerous Calling*, powerfully makes the point that the church leader is not the head of the body but part of the body which needs the other members of the body as much as they need him.

⁵ ‘Authority’ is etymologically rooted in ‘author’ (Latin).

⁶ RT Aimee Byrd - <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/what-does-authority-mean>.

work a change in human hearts (1 Thess. 2:13). The biblical church leader knows that in himself he has neither the authority nor the power to do that.

4. Restriction

There are a number of ways in which the power and authority of the church leader is further relativized and restricted. One way is with the prevalent NT model of the plurality of elders. Rather than one kingly leader there is a distribution of power and authority and the implication of shared responsibility and roundtable discussion (cf. Acts 15:6). While there is some disagreement between Presbyterians and Baptists on church polity and the degree of congregational involvement and authority in different areas, there is actually a lot of agreement – especially that the concentration of power in the hands of one man is a bad thing. Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists historically were all fighting against the tyranny of monarchical bishops and to some extent also of single-elder-led churches. “For there is nothing in greater opposition to the discipline of Christ than tyranny; and the door is wide open to it if all the power is surrendered to one man” (Calvin on 1 Cor. 5:4).

Another way that the concentration of power is avoided is in the division of deacons and elders with a corresponding rough division of financial and administrative responsibilities from the task of being devoted to prayer and the word (Acts 6).⁷ This is highly interesting when you compare it with the worldly model of where power and influence is wielded very largely through control of finances and resource distribution.

And a further way that the power of the church leadership is circumscribed is through the authority of the congregation as a whole – what Carson calls the ‘final authority.’ If the congregation has the power to apply church discipline to a pastor or elder (because he is after all a member of the congregation) then this puts a check on his authority (Matthew 18:17-19 cf. 1 Tim 5:19-20).

5. Change of manner

As we’ve discussed previously, there is a beautiful picture of the manner with which a Christian leader should exercise his ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2. There Paul is very clear that he has ‘authorization’ from God himself – he is not trying to please men but God (v4). This frees him up to genuinely love others (rather than using them to boost his own ego). Instead of asserting his authority he is like a nursing mother caring for little children (v6-7), “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (v8 cf. v17; 3:1, 8-9). There is leadership but it is that of a loving father – exhorting, encouraging, comforting, urging in the gospel. As Charles Bridges notes, even Jesus, who taught with an authority that none of us has in ourselves, still spoke gracious words (Luke 4:22). He could rebuke and cause offence but he did not yell or rant or break a bruised reed (Isa. 42:2-3).

6. Change of means

The main means of exerting power and influence in the *World* are:

- political manoeuvring
- hierarchy - pulling rank – positional power
- financial control
- labour control – the ability to hire and fire
- information control
- appeal to self-centred interest – incentivising
- emotional manipulation – bypassing the mind, attempt to manufacture emotional experience
- educational achievement – asserting/assuming right to rule because of academic level

⁷ Though admittedly the division is not quite so clear cut as that in the rest of Acts and the NT. Elders remain in overall responsibility for all the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 5) and deacons are simply ‘servants’ who may well be involved in serving through Word ministry as much as serving through administration. However it is fair to say that the day to day administration of finances should normally be by deacons (2 Cor. 8:18-21).

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In the *Church* things should be quite different.⁸ The main means of leadership in the church are:

- prayer
- public reading, preaching and 1-to-1 ministering of the Word of God
- right administration of the sacraments (which includes the barring of those under church discipline)
- exemplary living, especially holiness, home life, humility and hard work (1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Thess. 2:9-10)
- guarding the flock by rebuking, refuting and barring false teachers (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9-11)
- fatherly counsel – encouraging, urging, rebuking (1 Thess. 2:12)

7. Change of purpose

This may be the most significant shift of all – the shift from power and authority having a self-centred purpose (to accumulate honour or security for myself) to a new purpose to build others up and help them to flourish (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). Commenting on Genesis 1:28 Vanhoozer notes, “authority over the earth has nothing to do with imposing one’s ‘will to power’ on creatures or creation. On the contrary, God authorized the first couple ‘to accomplish a particular task, to act in a particular capacity, to seek a particular end’” (*Biblical Authority After Babel*, p. 87). Leadership in the church is not our own project to build our own tower of Babel but rather a responsibility to build up others – to work for their joy and faith in Christ (2 Cor. 1:24 cf. Phil. 1:25), to be willing to say hard things out of love (2 Cor. 7:8-9), to be spent in preaching Christ from the Scriptures (2 Cor. 4) for people’s eternal good and God’s glory.

1 Pet. 5:1-7

What do we learn here that provides the healthy pattern for right exercise of authority and guards against the abuse of power?

Seeking accountability

- People
- Systems

You are accountable to God for your care of his flock (Heb. 13:17) and that is a fearsome thing. But when it comes to human accountability – those who will remind you of your ultimate accountability to God and be concerned for your soul and who will ask you about your temptations to pride and lust and ask you how your marriage is going, how you’re using your time and whether you’re resting – you will need to seek out that accountability. You will not find people queuing up to give it. You will need to cultivate friendships – inside and outside the church, older and peers.

You also need some sort of systems – e.g.:

- a weekly or monthly accountability review⁹
- time tracking app (e.g. [Toggl](#)) – to keep you honest on how much you’re working and resting
- diary scheduling in time with friends, phone calls, meet ups

⁸ There will be some commonalities between leadership in the world and in the church – hopefully be a sensible ‘household management’, ‘directing affairs’, envisioning, planning, modelling and mentoring – but there will be a different content and aim in all these and the church will not want to be using worldly levers of power as listed above but rather the spiritual means below (cf. 2 Cor. 10:4).

⁹ A Kenyan friend, who is absolutely brilliant at ministry systems and strategy, has got a whole range of spreadsheets for keeping himself accountable on how many evangelistic encounters he is having each week and how he is following people up. He uses the weekly evaluation sheet below for himself and all those he leads.

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Weekly Evaluation

NAME:

DATE:

To be turned in no later than Monday @ 6pm

WALK WITH GOD

- How is your walk with God?
 - How frequently are you meeting alone w/ God for prayer, worship, and Scripture? Has it been rich?
 - What has God been teaching you this week?
 - How has your personal holiness been? (thoughts, deeds, words, actions?)
 - Did you look at anything inappropriate? How has lust been? Do you have a clear conscience?
 - At a heart level, are you encouraged or discouraged?
 - How is your home life? Do you feel out of balance or in balance?
 - What's something I could pray specifically for you this week outside of your church ministry?
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MINISTRY

- What is your top priority/goal for the church at the moment? How is that going?
 - How are you doing personally and as a church in engaging and evangelising?
 - Give me one highlight from ministry this week.
 - How are you doing in training others? How are your key men/women doing? (Describe them by name) What did you do with them this week? (indicate by date) Any difficulties faced? (Be brief, but helpful).
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MISC

- Is there anything else you'd like me to know or discuss with me?
- Pressing prayer items?
- Urgent issues?