

Introduction

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured . . . You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

(Ezekiel 34:2–4)

The evangelistic youth service was rapidly approaching, but Greg the minister was worried. It wasn't that the youth were actively voting with their feet but there was a decided lack of enthusiasm. Two weeks before, he decided to pop into the youth meeting to encourage them. 'Come on, everyone. Let's think now about who we are going to invite,' he said. 'You don't want the event to bomb, do you? It would be very sad if we had to cancel it. You do want your friends to hear about Jesus, don't you?' The youth all looked at their shoes, uneasily.

A couple of days later Greg was approached by Sally, a concerned parent, who said that her daughter was in floods of tears because she couldn't think how to invite people and wondered if the success of the event and the salvation of her friends depended on her doing something she felt unable to do. Several others apparently felt the same. Sally gently asked Greg whether he had put too much pressure on the youth. Greg had never thought about power dynamics when he was with the youth group. Considering himself easy-going and likeable, he could scarcely imagine that anyone would interpret his relational encouragement to evangelize as undue pressure. He didn't *think* he had abused his power or position. He had no intention of

using the youth to make his vision happen, but had he inadvertently crossed a line and used the power of his position or his winsome personality to coerce young people into doing something they didn't want to do?

Mapping the slippery slope

This is a book about what happens when Christian leadership goes wrong. Today's culture has become deeply sensitive to issues of power imbalance, misuse of authority and manipulation. The story above is a relatively innocuous example of a situation in which there is no intention to discourage, but also no thought has been given to the relational power dynamics at play.

At the other end of the spectrum, far more serious abuses of power and position (both historical and contemporary) have recently come to light in a variety of Christian settings, in which leaders have misused their authority, not to feed the flock of God but rather to feed on it. Examples range from patterns of hurtful leadership behaviour to harassment, coercive and dominating leadership, and even criminal physical and/or sexual abuse. Names that used to be held in respect are now synonymous with something else.

In this book I attempt to step back to address issues of authority and power through a somewhat more objective framework. However, it is important to say at the outset that the issues are profoundly personal and intensely painful. I have been deeply saddened by hearing victims and survivors of manipulative or bullying leaders describe how bonds of trust have been broken, emotional lifelong scars have been inflicted, and lives have been devastated by the inability or refusal of churches, tribes and denominations to deal with those who misuse their power and position. I am incredibly grateful to the many people who have shared painful stories, experiences and concerns with me, and have no doubt there are more whose stories have yet to be heard and for whom justice has yet to be

Introduction

served. I know also, from first-hand experience, the pain and personal cost of being on the wrong end of coercive and manipulative leaders. While this doesn't give me any greater right to comment on the painful situations that others face, I hope readers won't feel that what follows comes from some disinterested armchair theorist.

My aim is modest. I hope to sketch a map of the slippery slope of power – the path that runs from good intentions, via lack of accountability and transparency, down into manipulation and self-serving, all the way to the most serious abuses – and put up some 'turn back' signs. It isn't intended to be a comprehensive treatment. Rather it is a first word that I hope may provide a diagnosis of common symptoms to increase awareness and suggest some basic first aid. While I will discuss some of the *worst* abuses of power and position, I spend more time exploring the *first* abuses that set leaders on the slippery slope. My prayer is that describing the issues will help us spot if we or others are in danger of heading down the slope – God willing, before we damage other people or bring disrepute on Christ and the gospel.

No doubt a small minority become Christian leaders actively seeking ungodly opportunities to exercise power over others. They are, deliberately and intentionally, the wolves described by Ezekiel. Terrifyingly, they are even worse than wolves in sheep's clothing – they are wolves in *shepherd's* clothing.¹ From the outset they are coercive predators, in it for themselves. However, I believe the great majority of leaders don't deliberately set out to abuse power and position. Nevertheless, some do despite their initial good intentions. Misuse of power, as we shall see, might not be intended to harm, but lack of intention doesn't remove culpability. The heart is deceitful, and we are never fully aware of our own motives.

That leaders can abuse power without realizing it, either through ignorance or self-deceit, should make us all the more serious and

¹ The metaphor of wolves in shepherd's clothing is not mine, but I have been unable to find a clear single origin for it.

Introduction

self-reflective about our use of it. As in the case of vicar Greg, it is common for leaders to miss warning signs. Greg's negative impact on the youth was quite unintentional, but his being oblivious didn't make it any less real. And if leaders can misuse position and power unintentionally (as well as very deliberately, as we shall see), churches can equally be blind to it. They rely heavily on trust in leaders and are often unaware of where the limits on leader authority ought to lie.

No Christian leader – no leader of any kind – is immune from the dangers of misuse of power and position. Which frustrated leader has never thought something like, 'If I could remove that person and replace them with someone who would be more supportive, I could actually do what needs to be done, and the church would probably not question it if I did'?

Asking the right questions

In what follows, the vital questions are: could I be in danger of misusing power and position? Could our church? How would I know? Would anyone have the courage to tell me, and how would I respond if they did? Are the structures around me sufficiently transparent and helpful to stop me if I am unknowingly on a trajectory towards shipwreck? I pray that what follows will help you and your church bring these things into the light.

I am keenly aware of the difficulty of writing on this subject from within a Christian tribe. It is next to impossible to identify one's own blind spots. Without doubt there are evangelical power structures, and I am a (very minor) part of them. Like every leader, I am aware that I have not always unfailingly exercised authority wisely and kindly myself. Furthermore, the issues we are going to examine play out differently in different Christian cultures, tribes and denominations, according to their respective understandings of how leadership authority is assigned and exercised. My own tribe is UK

Introduction

independent evangelical, and I have some experience of the world of mission agencies. I am very grateful for insights from Anglican friends, but have little personal experience of how issues of misuse of power work in episcopal or synodical settings. If the book is to be useful to you, you will need to translate some of what follows in the light of your own situation.

What this book is not

After a lot of thought, I have decided not to discuss the particularities of high-profile cases or individuals. This may distress some readers by giving the impression that I am minimizing the seriousness of leader malpractice or, even worse, covering up for abusers. Nothing could be further from my intention. My hope is to provide a framework that is relevant to specific situations in the public eye at the time of writing, but also more generally. The pen portraits in the book are fictional composites, but all illustrate real issues I have encountered over the years. Additionally, I have provided links in the bibliography to several reports in the public domain regarding specific cases, and I recommend reading these alongside this book.

Furthermore, at points I seek to understand and address some of the pressures of ministry that might play into leaders going bad. I realize that this may be uncomfortable for readers who are victims or survivors of power abuse. This is in no way intended to excuse or justify any form of harmful leadership, undermine victims or qualify their need for justice, but I recognize that it could be interpreted as explaining away wicked behaviour. There is nothing as painful as making public revelations of abuse, at great personal cost, only to be further hurt by feeling that someone is downplaying them. My hope is that careful investigation of complexities will help us improve our understanding and make us more able and willing to repent and change when abuses of position and power come to light – and ideally before they do.

Introduction

This is not a technical book. I have no expertise in safeguarding or legal matters. Rather, it is simply observations from twenty-five years in Christian ministry, the last fifteen of which have centred on mentoring church leaders.² It is paid leaders I have most in mind, but my hope is that it will be helpful to leaders and church officers across the warp and weft of wider church life, to leaders in Christian agencies, to those considering or preparing for vocational ministry and those who train them.

I am extremely grateful to those who have shared their stories and concerns. Many have offered suggestions and corrections that have greatly improved the book. Special thanks are due to my wife Ros, my Living Leadership colleague Paul Coulter, and Caleb Woodbridge and Tom Creedy at IVP. All errors, of course, are mine.

² At the time of writing, others are also reflecting very helpfully on similar themes but with somewhat different approaches. To mention just two, for victim-centred thinking informed by a deep understanding of trauma I highly recommend the work of psychologist Diane Langberg; and for pastoral reflections on leadership and personality, readers would benefit greatly from the writing of professor and counsellor Chuck DeGroat.

Part 1

**BIBLICAL PATTERNS OF
HEALTHY LEADERSHIP**

1

Servant leadership for the good of others

[Jesus] asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ He took a little child and had him stand among them.

(Mark 9:33–36a)

I wonder if you have ever attended a conference or watched a video online in which a passionate and motivated speaker has enthused about the successes of their church or movement. You were inspired by accounts of people being saved, baptized and discipled, and were challenged by the vision, strategies and tough choices the leader had made.

We are easily drawn in by energy, drive, charisma and what seems like success. But how can we tell if what we are seeing is healthy, biblical leadership? How can we look beyond charisma to character and submission to Scripture? And if you yourself are that leader up on stage, how can you ensure you are modelling healthy leadership?

Before we explore the trajectory that leads away from healthy biblical leadership and into danger, we first need to establish a plumb line: what does the New Testament say about authentic, healthy Christian leadership?

Disciples getting it wrong

James and John asked Jesus to give them the most glorious places in his kingdom. In return Jesus gave them an extended telling-off for wanting to exercise leadership in the same way as the world. '[The] rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,' he said. 'Not so with you.' He presented himself as their model to emulate: 'even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:42–43, 45). The world says that leadership is about power, status, accomplishment, climbing the ladder and being the boss. Leaders are at the top of the pile. The fact that James and John's request is recorded shows that Christians are far from immune from this temptation.

For several years I taught a course in church leadership, for which I read much of the work published in the UK over a thirty-year period. By far the most common definition of leadership was 'leadership is influence', a definition you will struggle to find in the Bible. It is a pragmatic, secular definition, baptized and used in the church, and labelled therefore as 'Christian leadership', not dissimilar to the role and skill set of a CEO or company director, only exercised in a Christian context.

However, Christian leadership is of a completely different kind. We have a different goal: God being glorified through people coming to Jesus and becoming worshipping disciples. We have different motivation, power, methods and character. Leadership is not merely the exercise of influence or a set of skills and competencies.

Leadership is servanthood

Of course, the other main definition of leadership is servanthood. But even then, it is reasonably rare to find it explained and explored in leadership books rather than just assumed. Let's examine a few

passages to help us put flesh on the bones of what ‘servant leadership’ means.

1 What is Christian leadership?

Christian leadership is a spiritual gift. ‘We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is . . . leadership, let him govern diligently’ (Romans 12:6, 8).

In 1 Corinthians 12:7 the spiritual gifts are described as manifestations of the Holy Spirit for the common good. A manifestation is a showing or demonstration of the Holy Spirit. He gives gifts to Christians so that God will be seen. The apostle Peter expands on how grace gifts from God (of which every Christian has at least one) are to be used: ‘Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms’ (1 Peter 4:10).

Spiritual gifts then, including leadership, are given to each believer, not for ourselves but for serving others, in the common good. When we use our spiritual gifts to serve in this way, we are stewards of God’s grace. Peter highlights the overall purpose: ‘so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen’ (1 Peter 4:11).

2 What is the point of Christian leadership?

The point of Christian leadership is to build up the body in maturity, love and effectiveness. We serve, stewarding grace gifts from God, so that he is known, worshipped and glorified through Jesus. The context in which leadership is exercised is the church, which is God’s worshipping, witnessing community, the body of Christ. In Ephesians 4 we discover that ‘to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it’ (verse 7). ‘It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service’ (verses 11–12).

Biblical patterns of healthy leadership

God gives leaders to help everyone else to use their own gifts in his service. The aim is that ‘the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ’ (verses 12–13).

This maturity is experienced by not being blown around by false teaching: ‘Then we will no longer be infants . . . blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming’ (verse 14) and by the body growing in love and doing its work effectively:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

(verses 15–16)

The point of Christian leadership is to shepherd the body, and all the disciples within it, to play their part in God’s great purposes. Leaders are given to equip and nurture all the disciples in their ministries, not to do all the ministry of the church for them.

3 How do Christian leaders do this?

Christian leaders shepherd the body by working with people for their progress and joy in the faith. The apostle Paul told the church in Philippi what he wanted to do upon his release from prison: ‘I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me’ (Philippians 1:25–26). His aim is that they will glory abundantly in Jesus, being full of joy in him. Christian joy is the experience of gladness or happiness, not in plans or possessions or ambitions, but in God. When we become Christians, we

are saved into a relationship in which he gives his joy to us. In John 15:11, Jesus tells the disciples to remain in him, and thereby in the love of the Father, so that his joy may be in them and their joy may be complete. The core focus of Christian leaders, therefore, is that disciples will know and enjoy God as they obey and follow Jesus.

The heartbeat of all discipleship and all leadership is the joy of the Lord, of which experiencing his grace is the wellspring. The Bible is clear that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10). And yet it can come as a surprise, even to seasoned leaders. One church leader told me, 'I have never seen that my job is to be a worker who helps other people overflow with joy in God. That revolutionizes everything.' When a church is full of joy in God it is easy to see why it attracts people to Christ. Similarly, when it isn't, we can see easily why there is little attraction.

James and John got it wrong. Christian leaders are not Jesus' top generals. They are under-shepherds helping the flock enjoy and feed on God, out of which flows firm and secure faith: 'Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm' (2 Corinthians 1:24).

4 What does this look like in practice?

In practice this involves teaching, shepherding, modelling and spiritual parenting. The church in Thessalonica, whose founding provoked a riot (Acts 17:1–8), was a great source of joy to the apostle Paul, because they were imitators: 'You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit' (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

The modelling and example they received included hearing the gospel and witnessing leaders who were genuine (1 Thessalonians 2:5). Paul and his team were gentle and caring, encouraging like mothers (2:7), sharing their lives as well as the gospel (2:8). Like spiritual fathers they comforted, encouraged and urged the new disciples to live for God (2:11–12). All with the aim that God would

Biblical patterns of healthy leadership

make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

(1 Thessalonians 3:12–13)

5 In what do authentic leaders boast?

Authentic Christian leaders boast in weakness, not strength. In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul talks about his famous ‘thorn in the flesh’. We don’t know what it was, but it was distressing and he pleaded three times with the Lord to take it away. The Lord did not remove it, but instead used it to teach him a vital lesson about grace, power and weakness: ‘But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”’ (verse 9). Note the connection between God’s grace and power and Paul’s weakness. It is when we are weak that God’s power is manifest, not when we are strong. His grace is sufficient. Paul continues:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (verses 9–10)

The trouble for many of us as Christian leaders is that we simply don’t like it! Or we think that our churches don’t want it. Faced with a choice between apparently strong, resilient, visionary, resourceful leaders or weak but prayerful ones, we secretly think the church wants the first type. We can imagine that they won’t want us if we delight in weakness. We can confuse confidence with competence, all the while neglecting character. Maybe we even fear that if we embrace weakness God might not honour it, and we will find

Servant leadership for the good of others

ourselves both disempowered and no longer respected by the people we are meant to lead.

But this *is* authentic Christian leadership – encouraging, modelling, parenting, comforting, strengthening hearts in the Lord and, in our weakness, helping people to live lives worthy of God.

As we make and mature disciples, the aim, just as it was in Thessalonica, is that believers would know God and glory in Jesus, and would be full of joy given by the Holy Spirit, increasing in holiness, abounding in hope and overflowing in love. We long to see them welcome the gospel message with joy and base their lives on their hope in the risen Jesus, and then see the message ringing out from them.

One church leader told me in conversation: ‘I thought I was appointed to do all the ministry. I was taught that only people ordained by a bishop have spiritual gifts.’ It was no surprise that in his church he expected to do everything and for the congregation to act as consumers of his professional ministry. He had a theology of them *not* having spiritual gifts to use.

Another said: ‘The pathology is such that churches can be set up not to equip each saint, but for the saints to remain at primary school level, with the pastors feeling good about themselves rather than helping them towards maturity.’

It is vital to get the foundations right. God gives leaders to the church to help all the disciples get involved with Christ and his cause, living lives worthy of the calling of God. Leaders are under-shepherds for the glory of God and for the good of his people, feeding his flock and spreading his fame. We serve churches so that God is glorified: ‘For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants *for Jesus’ sake*’ (2 Corinthians 4:5, emphasis added).

Christian leadership is not foundationally about running a church or some activity within a church. Skills in organizing and running

a church are important, but that's just a function. Being a servant of a church for the sake of the Lord means that everything leaders do is so that Jesus is exalted in their own lives and the lives of others. The heart of leadership is joining with the work of the Holy Spirit in forming Christ-besotted worshippers.

Putting it into practice

We have barely scratched the surface of the New Testament's teaching on leadership – let alone that of the whole of Scripture! One other passage that offers us some helpful direction in our own formation as leaders is 1 Timothy 3, which lays out clearly that Christ-like character and the ability to teach the gospel correctly are fundamental to practising leadership.

Four features in particular stand out in helping to ensure that leaders remain godly and avoid misuse of position and power. These are: accountability, plurality, transparency and embodiment in the local church community.¹

1 Accountability

People should be tested before they can serve as leaders (1 Timothy 3:10). Churches and denominations will differ on what the legitimate mechanisms for scrutiny should be, but being appropriately accountable for both our personal walk of faith and our use of power and authority is vital.

This is not to say that leaders never make mistakes, sometimes bad ones, or that they never need to repent and seek forgiveness. Godly leaders should in fact be the chief repenters. As we will see, leaders

¹ I'm grateful to an Anglican friend who pointed out that in denominational settings this maps nicely on to:

- accountability to those in hierarchical authority above us;
- plurality with peers in leadership alongside us;
- transparency with every church member over whom our position confers some degree of authority.

Servant leadership for the good of others

who evade accountability or avoid evaluation stand in much greater danger of misusing power to excuse and cover up misjudgements, errors and sin. And leaders who are deeply embedded relationally in the community need to be carefully accountable so that they do not misuse the very relational capital and credibility that makes their ministry work.

2 Plurality

Leadership in the New Testament is resolutely plural and collegial. The picture is of shepherds acting together, not of lone rangers. Plurality alone doesn't ensure that leadership remains godly, of course. There is always the danger of an inner circle of mutually reinforcing controlling people. But the lone leader is in far greater danger than the one who shares with colleagues.

3 Transparency

Paul says that overseers must be above reproach. Elsewhere he tells Timothy to let people see his progress. He himself has allowed his own life to be an open book (2 Timothy 3:10). Christian leadership is not politics. It never stitches things up behind the scenes. It should be exercised visibly, in plain sight, so that people can have confidence they are not being manipulated:

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:2)

4 Embodiment in the church community

Leaders are models and examples, first in their families (1 Timothy 3:4) and then in the church (e.g. Philippians 2:19–30; 1 Timothy 4:12–16). My friend Gordon Dalzell says that leadership is an

Biblical patterns of healthy leadership

‘imprinting responsibility’, like the imprint of an old signet ring on sealing wax. It is not merely a set of learnable, transferable skills that can be exercised with a life divorced from embodiment in the church community.

Leaders are spiritual parents in whose lives the effects of the gospel should be clearly visible and possible to emulate. How else can leaders encourage people to imitate them as they imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1)? Leaders are not religious professionals carrying out a function while holding the community at arm’s length. People should be able to see how they live before God, so they know how to do likewise: ‘We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us’ (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

In Part 2 we will see how each of these four characteristics is key to trustworthiness and good practice, and how evading or avoiding them can easily turn into misuse of position and power. Before that, however, we need to consider how authority can be exercised in a healthy and godly manner.