

Authority and Love

NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE

In an earlier chapter we have seen that God's great love, exemplified and put into practice by Jesus Christ in God's mighty action of salvation through the cross, is the true power in the universe, that is to be exercised in our relationships with one another:

... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:43–45).

We saw that the apostles Peter and Paul were being true to their Master's teaching and action when they said:

Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).

I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith (2 Cor. 1:24).

With the best of intentions we can seek to exercise authority and power in relationships after this manner. But experience shows that it does not always work this way. There is something inherent in the sinful human situation that leaves

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any exercise of authority open to the abuse of power in relationships with people, and even tends that way.

How can our exercise of power in relationships be safeguarded to be an expression of God's love in action? We have already seen that, because of the importance to us of love and relationships—for which we have been made—and because of the power differential present in most relationships, there is an inherent power present in relationships that can be used for good, or for evil. Our concern here is to help ensure that it will be used for good.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF POWER

The historian, Lord Acton (1834–1902), is well known for his famous saying: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.¹ Part of the genius and resilience of democratic forms of government is that this tendency of sinful human beings is recognised and allowed for in the checks and balances that are set in place, and in the separation and distribution of powers among the monarchy or presidency, the executive government, the legislature, the judiciary, and the voting public, to ensure that no one person or group ever has a monopoly of power that does not have to reckon with the others.

One of the twentieth century's most significant literary sagas, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, addresses this very issue of preventing all power from coming into the hands of one powerful being, so that the world be not destroyed. Frodo, a humble hobbit of simple, sturdy, earth-bound stock, appears to be ideally suited to be chosen for this colossal task, as one

¹ The quote comes in a letter written to bishop Mandell Crieghton dated April 1887, referring to Papal power. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton> (accessed 25th January 2008).

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who would be least likely to be carried away by it. But such is the burden of the responsibility he bears for others, that in the end even the heroic Frodo succumbs to the seemingly irresistible lure of taking all power to himself. Only something that occurs from outside himself prevents this from happening. Ever thereafter, in the victory of his achievement, Frodo carries a reminder of his failure, in a wound that throbs periodically.

Jesus told a parable about some tenants who worked in a vineyard that belonged to another, who acted as if it was their own, and violently resisted the rightful claims of the owner. The climax came when the owner's son appeared on the scene:

... those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours' (Mark 12:7).

Thinking that thereby all power in the vineyard will be theirs, they kill the son. But in that very action their doom is sealed, and the vineyard is secured for the owner and those to whom he gives it.

Instances of this tendency to arrogate undue power to oneself abound in Scripture. Saul, gifted as head and shoulders above all the rest, and chosen by God to be the first king of Israel, objected that he was 'only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin' (1 Sam. 9:21). When appointed, he hid himself among the baggage (1 Sam. 10:20–24). This show of inferiority masked an angry, jealous and arrogant spirit, that foolishly took to itself powers that were not his, and issued in decisions that were rash, counterproductive, disobedient to God, and ultimately disastrous (see 1 Sam. 13:8–14; 14:24–30; 15:1–35; 18:10–11; 19:9–10; 28:3–19). David, his successor, chosen by God as 'a man after his own

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heart' (1 Sam. 13:14), was not immune from considering himself above the law, as he took for himself another man's wife and arranged for her husband to be killed. By this David brought great shame and sorrow on himself, and rendered his own family dysfunctional (see 2 Sam. 11:1–12:14). David's son, Solomon, given by God 'a wise and discerning mind' (1 Kings 3:12) to govern God's great people, was not prevented from 'exalting himself above other members of the community' and going beyond God's law by acquiring horses, wives and wealth for himself, to end up worshipping other gods (see Deut. 17:16–20; 1 Kings 10:13–11:13). His son Rehoboam, given a chance to moderate his father's excesses, responded with yet harsher impositions, which occasioned a lasting split in his kingdom:

My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions (1 Kings 12:10–11).

Lest we think that such lapses are reserved to males, let us not forget Athaliah. A daughter of Ahab king of Israel and queen Jezebel, committed to the alternative Baal-worship, she was married to King Jehoram of Judah, who was succeeded by their son Ahaziah. When Ahaziah was killed in Jehu's purge against the house of Ahab, Athaliah as queen mother, in a desperate grab for power, 'set about to destroy all the royal family', including, presumably, all her own grandchildren. When the one who had been rescued was proclaimed king six years later, Athaliah could only see this as 'Treason! Treason!' (see 1 Kings 16:29–33; 2 Kings 8:16–29; 9:21–28; 11:1–16).

Thus, while God has said, 'there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other' (Isa. 45:6), we have taken it upon ourselves, in various ways, to say, 'I am, and there is no

one besides me' (Isa. 47:8). This is particularly true of those who are in a position to exercise power over others.

Pope Gregory the Great (540–604 AD) wrote a highly influential work called *The Book of Pastoral Rule* 'showing what a Pastor ought to be'.² Gregory gives examples of how the exercise of power has a certain ambivalence within it. When Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him, Peter was quick to say. 'Stand up; I too am a man' (Acts 10:26, RSV), thus emphasising his equality with Cornelius. When, however, Peter is given to discern the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, he immediately rebukes them, even to the point where they drop dead suddenly, thus demonstrating his power to judge what is evil. Similarly, while Paul says to the Corinthians that he does not 'lord it over your faith' (2 Cor. 1:24), this does not stop him from being willing if necessary to 'come to you with a stick' (1 Cor. 4:21). Such leadership requires both 'compassion justly considerate, and discipline affectionately severe':

² Gregory the Great, *Liber Regulae Pastoralis (Book of Pastoral Rule)*, also known as *Liber Pastoralis Curae (Book of Pastoral Care)*, book 4. From <www.newadvent.org/fathers/3601.htm> (accessed 16 January 2008). Translation © 2007 by Kevin Knight. Written at the time of Gregory's appointment as bishop of Rome in 590 AD, this book was given wide provenance among bishops and rulers in Spain and Gaul. Brought to England by Augustine of Canterbury in 596 AD, it was translated or paraphrased three hundred years later into the West Saxon language at the instigation of King Alfred the Great, to be distributed to all his bishops, and until recently remained influential in alerting secular and ecclesiastical rulers to the necessity and difficulty of the exercise of power. See Preface; also Stephen Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology* (Continuum, London, 2006), p. 138. Gregory states that his purpose is to:

... consider after what manner everyone should come to supreme rule; and, after arriving at it, after what manner he should live; and, living well, after what manner he should teach; and, teaching aright, with what great consideration every day he should become aware of his own infirmity; lest either humility fly from the approach, or life be at variance with the arrival, or teaching be wanting to the life, or presumption unduly exalt the teaching (*Pastoral Rule*, book 1: Introduction).

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... care should be taken that a ruler show himself to his subjects as a mother in loving-kindness, and as a father in discipline. And all the time it should be seen to with anxious circumspection, that neither discipline be rigid nor loving-kindness lax.

Such ‘circumspection’ requires the person in power to pay careful attention to their own inner state:

... let those who preside study without intermission that in proportion as their power is seen to be great externally it be kept down within themselves internally.

And in truth he orders this power well who knows how both to maintain it and to combat it.³

Stephen Sykes, in a wide-ranging study of power and Christian theology, says that the ambivalence inherent in the exercise of power needs to be consciously recognised, along with the dangers that accompany it:

In 1 Peter elders are exhorted not to domineer over those in their charge. At the same time the younger are instructed to be subjected to their elders. Here again the ambivalence of power is acknowledged. It takes very little imagination to think that the very same action could appear either an act of service to the unity of the community, or a piece of domineering presumption, depending on the standpoint from which the action was viewed.⁴

In other words, the very action by which well-intentioned leaders may think they are serving the good of their community may be experienced by others as oppressive and abusive, and may actually be so. Sykes also draws attention to Gregory’s ‘insight into both’.⁵ This means that it is quite

³ Gregory, *Pastoral Rule*, book 2, chapter 6.

⁴ Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, pp. 114–115.

⁵ Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, p. 59.

possible for a person in power to be abusing that power at the expense of others and still not be aware or willing to acknowledge that this is the case.

**CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLES,
OR LOVE IN PERSON?**

How are we to handle such an awesome responsibility? How are we to know when it is necessary and appropriate to act in equality with compassion and loving-kindness, or with zeal against what is evil? How can we know when we are serving the good of the community, or when we are bringing undue pressure to bear? How can we be aware enough of our own needs and propensities to guard against the misuse or abuse of the power we have in other people's lives?

We can understand those who wish to remove all vestiges of power and hierarchy in the interests of affirming the equality of all. It is interesting to note, however, that attempts to do this are often accompanied by force, exerted by one group of people over another, giving rise to an inherent contradiction. In the French Revolution of 1789, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' were enforced by the guillotine. We are aware of George Orwell's famous dictum in *Animal Farm*: 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others'—'a comment on the hypocrisy of governments that proclaim the absolute equality of their citizens but give power and privileges to a small elite'.⁶

We have already seen that a power differential is unavoidably present in many relationships. Some see this as a result of the fall into sin, and so claim that it is done away with in the

⁶ See <www.bartleby.com/59/6/allanimalsar.html> (accessed 25th January 2008).

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redemption of Christ.⁷ We have seen that a functional ordering of relationships, with power differentials that are to be exercised in love and service, can be traced in Scripture from before the fall into sin, and remain operational after redemption, and on into the new creation.⁸ We maintain, then, that it is healthier to acknowledge that these power differentials are present, and to modify our behaviour accordingly, rather than to attempt to deny it while still taking advantage of the differentials that are there.⁹

Can we then apply to all we do what Jesus said about serving, as the hallmark of the Christian exercise of power?

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:42–44).

⁷ It appears that Gregory himself saw the differential ordering of relationships as coming from the fall: ‘it is clear that nature produced all men equal; but, through variation in the order of their merits, guilt puts some below others. But the very diversity which has accrued from vice is ordered by divine judgment, so that, since all men cannot stand on an equal footing, one should be ruled by another’ (*Pastoral Rule*, book 2, chapter 6).

⁸ For instance, in the creation, the sun is to rule the day and the moon is to rule the night—very beneficent forms of rule—and the human beings are to have dominion over all the other creatures of the earth—for their good (Gen. 1:16, 26, 28; compare 2:15, 18–19). In Jesus’ parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11–27), servants are given to ‘take charge of ten cities’ and ‘rule over five cities’ in the time of the kingdom. In 1 Cor. 6:3, Paul says: ‘Do you not know that we are to judge angels’—presumably in the age to come.

⁹ Stephen Sykes, who as a bishop has had a clear view of the church’s systems of decision making, is able to observe: ‘the opportunities for devious and covert forms of manipulation under cover of consultation and public expressions of humility, are not inconsiderable’ (*Power and Christian Theology*, p. 137)! This may not be restricted to the church alone.

Can the application of this principle of service guarantee a right exercise of power, and effectively prevent its abuse? Stephen Sykes warns:

The ambivalence of power is not mitigated merely by the invocation of service as the motive for its exercise. Here we must notice the phenomenon of camouflage . . . Those who hold or are attempting to gain power are adept at sensing what are popularly regarded as respectable motives for wanting to be powerful. Within the Christian community the motif of service (*diakonia*) is so prominent a part of the basic theological interpretation of roles, that reference to it is obligatory on every occasion when powers are being conferred. Plainly, the mere statement that all the powers to be exercised are to be exercised as service by no means guarantees that what is eventually carried out will be in accordance with the divine will or even, for that matter, with the moral law. The invocation of service refers to the intention which lies behind the action. It does not describe the action itself, which might be illegal or monstrously unjust. Nor does it bear upon how the action will be experienced or interpreted by those affected by it. The agent, moreover, could lack insight into his own motivations, with the result that what is spoken of as service in the interest of others is, in fact, self-serving. Or, indeed, while the motivation could be genuine, the consequences of the action could also be deleterious to their interests. The mere invocation of service precludes none of these possibilities.

That the exercise of authority should be disciplined by the recollection of the motif of service is a central and valuable Christian tradition. But it ought not to be possible to invoke that tradition without also being conscious of the political phenomenon of camouflage and the toils of self-deception; and with such consciousness one returns again to the ambivalence of power.¹⁰

It appears from this that all bases are filled, and we have nowhere to take comfortable refuge on our own terms, not even by the application of sound ‘principles’ that could ensure right practice.

¹⁰ Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, p. 115.

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We ask, with Paul the apostle, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ (2 Cor. 2:16). Paul’s answer does not reside in the application of principles, but in an action and enabling that God has done in us:

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5–6).

This ‘competency’, which is God’s action in us and not anything we have gained for ourselves, issues in us being ‘the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing’ (2 Cor. 2:15)—Christ himself coming out in our words and actions. If ‘love is from God’ and not from ourselves (see 1 John 4:7–12), then it is not sufficient merely to be told to love. Love itself must come. And come it has, in the person and work of Jesus. When Jesus said, ‘whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all’ (Mark 10:43–45), he was not laying down a principle. He was saying why he had come in person. He went on to say:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

As we have seen, that giving of Jesus, and our participation in it by obedient faith in him, is the true power of love. This will come through when our relationships with each other are consciously in this context of a relationship with Jesus.



Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *When have we been aware of ambivalence in the exercise of power between discipline and loving-kindness?*
- *What can help to ensure 'that neither discipline be rigid nor loving-kindness lax'?*
- *What have we known within ourselves of 'the insidious mechanisms connecting the exercise of authority to conceit, and the human proclivity for self-deception'?*
- *In what ways have we tried to 'manage' our relationships on the basis of correct principles?*
- *How does our relationship with Jesus Christ affect our relationships with each other?*