

Exercising Authority

Boss Versus Servant-Leader

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Part I

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Boss Versus the Servant-Leader

A church called me some years ago to mediate a dispute between the pastor and his elders. I knew all of them quite well and wondered what the problem could be since they were all godly people. When I met with the elders alone, early in the meeting one of the elders blurted out the underlying problem. He said, "The problem is simple. Jack is a *boss*, not a leader!"

The lights immediately came on in my mind! In my own working life I have worked for both bosses and leaders so I immediately understood what he meant. Bosses instill no confidence, they don't build subordinates as a team, and, worst of all, they demean those under them. A leader is quite the opposite. He instills confidence, builds teamwork, and makes those under him feel that they are an important team member who are real people and should have a voice in the decisions.

There are those in church leadership positions who are bosses. They don't know how to lead. They only know how to *drive* people. Some of these people are teachable. They can be taught to become good leaders. Others are not so teachable. They like being the boss and don't want anything to change!

I began learning the proper use of authority as a young Marine. I once had a corporal as my immediate authority and he was lazy. He ordered his subordinates to do his work for him as well as completing their own tasks. He would often tell us, "Don't do as I *do*, do as I *say*." At the time I didn't know enough about leadership principles and authority to know *what* was wrong but I knew that *something* was wrong with the corporal's leadership. I knew that somehow he was abusing the authority that his rank and position gave him. People like the corporal are eventually found out because the system is built to correct such situations. How? As a leadership principle, the Marines taught every one of us that when there was a hard or difficult task to be done, those in authority were to be right there partaking of the misery along with the lowest ranking man. The policy in the Marines was, "Never ask your men to do something you yourself won't do." Unfortunately, I have observed abuses of authority in the church. But the problem is that most church and/or ministry settings do not have a built-in correction system.

The Other Side of Submitting to God's Ordained Authority

This teaching is presented as an extension of our recent article on *Submitting to God's Ordained Authority*. As that article stated, I firmly believe in submitting to God's ordained authority. But I also know that authority can be and is misused and/or abused.

Ideally, anyone who holds any position of leadership in a local church should have the skills and knowledge of the principles of leadership necessary to exercise his or her authority wisely. Unfortunately, having a ministry position

does not automatically instill these in that leader. They almost always have to be learned.

Let's begin our analysis by asking the following questions, 1) "Why does this misuse of power and authority exist in the church?" and, 2) "What can be done about this misuse when it occurs?" In this two-part teaching we will answer these questions as we examine various forms of abuse of authority. We will also discuss principles surrounding the proper way to exercise one's authority in the ministry.

Authority defined

Webster's Dictionary defines authority as ". . . the power or right to give commands, enforce obedience, take action, or make final decisions."¹ I think this is a good definition of authority. It encompasses the power to give commands, the power to force others to obey you, the right to take action, and the right to make final decisions.

The Source of All Authority

Let's ask the question, "Where does all authority come from?" Jesus gave us the answer when He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Mat 28:18 NIV. See also Rom 13:1.) We therefore must understand that *all authority flows from Jesus*, and that He is the Head *over* all authority.

Scripture also makes clear that there are two realms of authority, natural and spiritual. Remember the Roman centurion who approached Jesus? He told Jesus about his *natural* authority in the Roman army. (Mat 8:5-10) He knew that his present problem did not involve the use of natural authority. Rather it involved spiritual authority. In short, he told Jesus that if the problem were in the natural realm he could take care of it because of the authority he already had. But since the problem was beyond the natural realm, he approached Jesus, the Master of spiritual authority, with his request. Jesus' response to this man was to marvel at his faith and grant his request.

1. Natural Authority

God realized that there had to be a hierarchy of authority in the natural realm to keep law and order and to do the business of each political entity. For example, every nation needs civil authority to enforce law and order and a head of state to deal with other heads of state. So, in a general sense, every head of state, governor, mayor, police officer, military person, etc., derives his or her authority from Jesus.

Please note that I am not saying that every individual who is currently in power (or who has exercised power in the past) is personally *chosen* by God. We see from 1 Sam 8:19-22 that God will sometimes give people what they want. The Israelites wanted a king. God knew they would be better off under His system of Judges. But God gave in to their demands

¹ Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, Copyright 1980, William Collins Publishers, Inc.

for a king. In other words, at times He will give in to a person's or nation's willfulness and stubbornness. Of course, God then always allows the consequences to flow from that willfulness. (See 1 Sam 7:10-18.)

2. Spiritual Authority

The spirit realm also has a hierarchal chain of authority, although those operating only in the natural realm cannot see or understand it. People who occupy leadership positions in the church have both the natural authority that comes with the position and the spiritual authority accompanying their position. Look what Paul told us on this subject.

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: (1 Cor 2:13-15 NIV)

This authority assigned to each office by the Lord, if it is used correctly, is sufficient to accomplish the work required by that office, whether it is a policeman in the natural realm, a deacon in a local church, or the head of a large international ministry.

Limitations on Both Natural and Spiritual Authority

However, we must also recognize that this assigned authority has limitations. For example, a pastor cannot go to another church, one in which he is unknown or has no connection, and exercise his authority there. Paul recognized this principle when he wrote, "Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you!" (1 Cor 9:2 NIV)

Why Do Some Abuse Authority?

To understand why we have people in leadership in the church who abuse their authority, we need to go back to the fall of mankind. When Adam disobeyed God's command to not eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, he brought sin into the world for all time. With Adam's sin came such human traits as pride, the drive to control, love of self over all others, and the desire to exercise power over others, to name just a few! These traits have been handed down through the ages to every generation. We all see them in others. It's especially easy to see them in people in the world, that is, unbelievers. After all, we know from John that, ". . . the whole world is under the control of the evil one." (1 Jn 5:19 NIV) The problem is that we don't usually see them in ourselves.

Why are these same traits sometimes found in our church leaders? The answer is that these men and women have not been sanctified enough to be purified from them. These people have not allowed the Lord to break them sufficiently to purge that inner, ugly sinfulness which includes the tendency to abuse whatever authority we have.

To be sure, many of these leaders have a call on their lives to serve the Lord. They can and do operate in all the gifts and the five-fold offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. Indeed, some of these people have extraordinary

leadership qualities and they often rise rapidly in Christian circles. But the sad truth is that they bring into these positions of leadership the baggage of abuse of authority. In fact, at times there is no real difference between those in the world who abuse their authority and those in the church who do so. It is just that these church leaders know how to speak "Christianese"!

Characteristics of Those Who Abuse Authority

Now let's look at what I call the personal characteristics of those who abuse authority. Another word for "personal characteristics" is sin! I see two characteristics or sins commonly found in those who abuse their authority: pride and the drive to control.

Pride

An abusive leader is almost always filled with pride. The pride may be obvious or it may be cloaked in humility, but it's there. Pride always has roots. It may be rooted in our family, our standing in a denomination, the size and so called "success" of our church or other ministry, our ability to preach and teach, or whatever. Someone who is always exalting his or her children, or telling others about his ministry successes and self-perceived accomplishments, or whatever, reflects this awful pride. Of course, inherent in this pride is the love of one's self! That's the biggest and ugliest root of all. It is also the hardest to get rid of.

Drive to Control

The drive to control is probably the most common outward characteristic of the leader who abuses his authority. This person wants to make all the decisions, especially in the areas he cares about. This need to control is usually extended to every area of the person's life. He tries to control his church, his wife, his children, how his home is run, his employees, his ministry, and so on. The list is endless and the control is never enough. If a man tries to control everything his wife does, he may get 90% control but he still gets angry because he can't seem to get that last 10%, no matter how hard he tries or how subservient his wife becomes.

As I have said, this desire to control may be obvious, or it may be more subtle. I know of a pastor of a large church who has a very gentle way about him, especially when he is dealing with the general membership of his congregation. One who socializes with him could never tell he was so controlling. It's only when someone becomes a deacon or elder, or a member of the staff, that one sees this controlling side of him. Sadly, over the years of observing this pastor's control of those in positions of leadership in his church, his subordinates just give up trying to make much of a difference. Everyone knows that he will get his way when all is said and done, so why try? Unfortunately, most people who are potentially strong leaders in the congregation eventually leave the church in frustration or anger. So this pastor has the control he wants but he doesn't have a healthy leadership or a spiritually prospering church.

I know of another man who is one of the most controlling people I have ever been around. He is the head of a large international ministry. I remember when his staff was remodeling their ministry offices. He decided where every cabinet and desk was placed. He wanted to control where

every item of furniture went, even in work spaces he never worked in! This type of leadership style is known as micro-managing. As a result of his micro-managing, his staff was continually demoralized and cynical, and no one remained in his employment very long.

I once sat in a church service and watched in utter amazement as the pastor controlled every aspect of the church service. It was so obvious. All key players, the organist, the pianist, the worship leader, those who sang solos, those who prophesied, all kept their eyes fixed on the pastor waiting for his signal! No one moved or did *anything* without his direction! He controlled the entire service from where he sat on the platform.

Is this training people to hear and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit? Is this releasing people to flow in the move of God? Obviously not. I believe the basis for this pastor's control was his desire to have a flawless service. But a service that lifts Jesus is to be desired over a flawless one. Most importantly, that need to control is not only an abuse of authority, it also limits the Holy Spirit.

Let me make one last observation on this subject of control. Over the years I have seen some men in ministry who appeared very controlling. But after watching them for a while, I concluded it was the wife who was the real controller. She may be quiet in church settings, but you can spot the control in her voice, her manner, or the way her husband responds to her. This is neither a healthy marriage nor a healthy ministry team. As a result, this kind of husband/wife ministry team really can't produce a truly healthy ministry.

Of course, the proper use of control is essential to the well being of any organization, church or family. Someone needs to be forceful enough to make the decisions. And if God places a person in the position of leadership in a ministry or church, then it is incumbent upon that person to exercise a balanced control over his sphere of influence. After all, Matthew states, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and *forceful men* lay hold of it." (Mat 11:12 NIV, emphasis added.) It is only when control gets out of balance that problems arise.

Categories of Abusive Control

1. Abuse of One's Own Family

When someone has a problem with control, it always shows up in the family. A controlling husband will do whatever he can to control his wife and children. I have watched many men in ministry control their wives. Sadly, as the couple gets older, instead of blossoming as a person, the wife seems to become less and less of a real person. She usually becomes so subservient that it is obviously an unhealthy relationship. Or, in the alternative, if the wife is a strong woman, she will push back against this oppressive control and the marriage will be stormy at best. This same thing will occur when a father or mother tries to exert undue control over their maturing children.

I remember one sad young husband who called to tell me his wife of 12 years had left him. I was shocked as they had always appeared to be a strong Christian couple raising their children in the church. But as I talked to him, it became clear

to me that he was one of the most controlling husbands I have ever encountered. He even tried to tell his wife when she could shop for food, visit friends, or do whatever she needed to in her daily activities. I met his son (now a young adult) a few years later and he appears to be very much like his father, very rigid and convinced that he is right all the time. What a tragic family legacy this man has passed down to his son. By the way, the father graduated at the top of his class in Bible school!

Please note that I am fully aware of and support the Scripture in its entirety concerning husbands and wives. Ephesians 5 tells us that wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. However, that same passage tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church and gave Himself up for her. Colossians 3:19 tells husbands to love their wives and do not be harsh with them. So if a husband abuses his power over his wife based on the submission verse, he is ignoring the rest of Scripture on this subject and he is in sin.

2. Sexual Abuse

We all know accounts of church leaders who have fallen into improper sexual relationships with women not their wives. This is an abuse of authority, even if the woman involved is a willing partner. The man is using his position of leadership to engage in a relationship that the Bible clearly prohibits.

Then there is the absolutely evil practice of sexual abuse of children by men. An example of this kind of horrible misuse of authority and power in both the natural and spiritual realms has been exposed in recent months here in America in the Roman Catholic Church. We now know that many Roman Catholic priests have sexually abused those under their charge (both boys and girls) for decades. Unfortunately this abuse is not confined to the Roman church, it occurs in the Protestant church as well.

3. Abuse of Employees

Another example of abusive control is when a senior pastor or head of a ministry abuses and oppresses his staff. This controlling person often demands unreasonably long hours of his employees. This wears people down physically as well as causing them to neglect their own families because they are never home, or when they are, they are tired and depressed.

Of course, another very common abuse of employees is to under pay them. A senior pastor or ministry leader like this is often willing to spend lots of the Lord's money on himself and what he thinks will make him look good, all the while oppressively underpaying those who work for him. This is a fundamental violation of Jesus' admonition to us that, ". . . a worker deserves his wages . . ." (Lk 10:7 NIV. See also 1 Tim 5:18.)

4. Manipulate Others to Get Own Way

Manipulation is the act of causing people to do your will by subtle or deceitful means. I can illustrate this point by telling a sad story about myself. Some years ago I was pastoring a church we had started the prior year. In the beginning we temporarily assigned people to do functional tasks within the church without giving anyone a title. But the time came to

elect deacons. I recall sitting in a meeting with our inner circle of leaders trying to devise a scheme to cause the people to elect those I thought should be deacons. In other words, *I was trying to manipulate the congregation.*

There was among us an old man who served most of his life on the mission field in Nigeria. He sat over in the corner, seemingly half asleep, listening to us discuss my various schemes. Finally he spoke up in a mocking voice of excitement. "I have an idea!" he said, "Why don't we do it the same way they did it in the Bible!"

That simple remark was a sufficient rebuke to bring me to my senses. We did do it the same way they did in the Bible! To my knowledge, I haven't ever tried to manipulate anyone or anything since. Incidentally, the people I felt should be deacons were elected. God can work His will without our manipulation. But had I succeeded in my scheme, that would have been an abuse of pastoral authority and could easily have motivated me to keep doing it.

5. Surround Self with "Yes Men"

A more subtle form of manipulation to gain control is to make sure that everyone around you in positions of leadership always agrees with you. In other words, they are your "yes men." This gives the appearance of plurality in the leadership but, in reality, the leader stills controls the decisions.

I know of an international ministry in which the head is very controlling. He always surrounds himself with men who will do whatever he wants. Interestingly, those in positions of leadership under him are just like he is. They are very controlling of those whom they supervise while at the same time they are completely submissive to the leader. This situation creates a very unhealthy ministry in which all those in leadership are abusively controlling, modeling their behavior after their boss.

It is so important to have people in the inner circle of leadership who have the courage and will to challenge the leader on issues. This is not being rebellious, it is just providing a balance and using all the gifts the Holy Spirit gives each of us to enhance and mature His church. For example, Barnabas challenged Paul over whether or not to take John Mark with them on their second missionary

journey. When these kinds of challenges are dealt with correctly, the whole church is better off for them. (See Acts 15:36-41.)

6. Misuse of Money/Assets

Another characteristic we often find in controlling leaders is their misuse of the money and assets of the church or ministry. They usually take plenty of money for themselves or their families. This is especially easy to do in a non-church ministry where the donors don't see if he drives an expensive car or lives in a house that costs more money than it should. In this same ministry I just described in the preceding section, the head of the ministry drives a very exotic, imported car and lives in a very expensive house while oppressively underpaying his employees. Of course, his employees see this abuse and have a very low opinion of this man personally while they struggle to continue to have faith in the ministry they are trying to serve.

Another form of financial abuse is when the senior pastor or ministry head keeps the finances a secret. I know of a pastor who was misusing the funds of his church and tried to keep it hidden by not allowing anyone to see either the expenses or the income of the church. When some of the elected leaders tried to get copies of the financial records, he forced them off the board. What an abuse of authority!

These brief illustrations by no means cover all of the situations in which church leaders abuse authority. But they can help us to recognize areas of abuse when we see them, either in others or in ourselves!

In Part II we will continue our analysis of this subject by examining how God views church leaders who abuse their authority, His final judgment on them, and the proper use and delegation of authority.

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