

Power and Pugnacity: Pastoral Issues and Approaches

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Abstract

A fissure has developed with the potential to become a fortified dividing line. At the very least, three personal and potentially volatile distresses are converging in such a way as to polarize people in society in general, the church and parachurch organizations, and even among families. Two are age-old problems—political partisanship and ethnic injustice. The third is the newcomer – perceptions and issues related to the ‘pandemic.’ Unfortunately, much use has been made of a marketing strategy known as “effective frequency” (The more you say/hear something, the more it sticks — regardless of its truth). As a leader, the elder/pastor is called to be an overseer who is “above reproach”, which Paul further delineates as not “*pugnacious*, but gentle, peaceable.”¹ As purveyors of the truth, it is incumbent that the wisdom/understanding and the approach of the Christian leader is characterized by a proper use of the ‘*power*’ that comes with the true/proper ‘*credentials*.’ Paul reminder is so important: “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*”² Though the presenting problems will change, our challenge as shepherds of the flock is to maintain a sensible mind and approach in the face of life’s often-unpredictable mix of triumphs, disappointments, and struggles.

¹ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 1 Timothy 3:2–3. (See also Titus 1:7.)

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Galatians 2:20.

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πλήκτης, ου, ό (πλήσσω; Aristot., Eth. Eud. 2, 3; Plut., Dio 971 [30, 4], Marcell. 298 [1, 2]; Diog. L. 6, 38; Ps 34:15 Sym.) pugnacious person, bully in a list of qualities relating to a superintendent 1 Ti 3:3; Tit 1:7.—DELG s.v. πλήσσω.

[William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 826.]

The Presenting Issue

It needs to be established from the start that the focus of this paper is not on what might or might not be a ‘Christian perspective’ regarding the three current issues that saturate the news and the social media: political partisanship, ethnic injustice, and the pandemic. Rather, the focus is on how a Christian leader (pastor/shepherd, overseer, or elder) fulfills their pastoral role.

In Acts 20:28–31, the third section of Paul’s “farewell address” to the Ephesian leaders, he exhorts them to be vigilant shepherds over the flock of God. But notice—and it cannot be stressed too much—that Paul’s first exhortation to the elders was a call for them to “*pay careful attention to yourselves.*” This self-examination should also include a mentoring or accountability partner. Self-deception and denial are too resilient not to have that significant other, chosen carefully because they are dependable, trustworthy, give positive reinforcement, yet are willing to share the tough, but needed advice. The obvious prerequisite is humility.

Paul has already stressed this need in the opening section of his address – as the first of three basic characteristics of his ministry. Just as humility had marked his service for the Lord (v. 19), as leaders examine themselves, the proper demeanor should be that of a slave who is “serving the Lord with all humility” (δουλεύων τῷ κυρίῳ μετὰ πάσης ταπεινοφροσύνης³). This was the consistent message which Paul frequently pointed to as not only a quality of leadership, but also as a major hallmark of the Christian life (cf. Phil 2:3; Col 3:12; Eph 4:2).

Thus, the issue being raised has to do with the accepted model of leadership ministry. A fissure has developed in our society with the potential to become a fortified dividing line. At the very least, the three personal and potentially volatile distresses mentioned above are converging in such a way as to polarize people in society in general, the church and parachurch organizations, and even among families. As purveyors of the truth, it is incumbent that the wisdom/understanding and the approach of the Christian leader is characterized by a proper use of the ‘*power*’ that comes with the true/proper ‘*credentials.*’

There is a need to develop a proper Christ-centered, cruciform understanding of power that guards against a pugnacious approach, since this is specifically included in two of the primary passages dealing with the qualifications for Christian leadership (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7). Is the accepted model for Christian ministry and leadership one that has humility as its foundation? I think not! Timothy G. Gombis correctly opines,

³ Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Ac 20:19.

Unfortunately, contemporary pastoral ministry has become associated with “leadership,” which in our current cultural climate suggests someone like a CEO or business executive who is far removed from the common life of the everyday people in our churches.⁴

The Power of Godly Character

An article that appeared in *The Banner* (February 2019), a magazine published monthly by the Christian Reformed Church in North America, begins with a haunting question, “*Why does the abuse of power by leaders in our churches and parachurch organizations seem to be more common than it used to be, and how can we best address this problem?*” Stated as a factual truth, the writer goes on to speak of the plague of ‘leadership abuse’ that is a scourge infecting the church, as well as the rest of society. The positive note is seen in the difference – “...for too long in the past, this evil perpetrated against the vulnerable among us was tolerated, ignored, or swept under the rug. Thankfully, this is no longer seen as acceptable.”⁵

Why does the abuse of power by church leaders seem to be more common? Some have suggested that the problem has not increased, only the reporting. But what if it actually has increased? Is it possible that there is a direct correlation between the change in leadership models—as suggested by Gombis—and the increase (or at least the potential for increased incidents) in actual abuse of power?

Diane Langberg, in her book, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, wastes no time in pointing to the importance of developing a thorough awareness of what power is and the impact “it has on all of us.” As a part of her training and vast experience – as a Christian psychologist – she realizes that power “is inherent in being human... [and that] Even the most vulnerable among us have power.” She also understands, however, that “power can be a source of blessing.” She is also too familiar with the improper use of power, concluding the second sentence of the very first chapter of her book with a warning that we cannot ignore. From the first paragraph of the first chapter of her book, Langberg acknowledges that when that power that each and every individual possesses takes the form of abuse—which has even become prevalent in the church—then “...untold damage to the body and name of Christ, often *in the name of Christ*, is done.”⁶

The proper use of power begins with a proper understanding of power – not just *what* power is, but more importantly where power comes from, since she believes that all power is derivative. Using as a reference Matthew 28:18-19 and John 5:19, Langberg points back to the importance of humility: “Any power that you and I hold is God’s and has been given by him for

⁴ Timothy G. Gombis, *Power in Weakness: Paul’s Transformed Vision for Ministry*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2021), 114.

⁵ <https://www.thebanner.org/columns/2019/02/why-does-the-abuse-of-power-by-leaders-in-our-churches-seem-to-be-more-common>

⁶ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 3.

the sole purpose of glorifying him and blessing others. If all power is derivative, then Christians should hold it with great humility.”⁷

Again,

God gives power to us as his creatures to be held in trust. Its purpose is to bless. If we understand the nature of power, both its source and its dangers, we will walk humbly before others, for our Master has said that if we would be chief, if we would lead and impact others, then we must serve.⁸

So, by placing the use of power in the context of serving, Langberg positions herself with Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders, especially Paul’s reminder of Jesus words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35, ESV). She also points to the internal origin and nature of power: “Godly power starts in the kingdom of our hearts, is expressed in the flesh, and moves out into the world.”⁹ Just a couple of pages later she will return to this emphasis by reminding her readers, “Godly power is derivative; it comes from a source outside us. It is always used under God’s authority and in likeness to his character. It is always exercised in humility, in love to God.”¹⁰

Though she does not refer to it as such, nor do this writer recall her using the terms pugnacious or pugnacity at any point in her book, she certainly describes an abusive, pugnacious use of power:

Any time we use power to damage or use a person in a way that dishonors God, we fail in our handling of the gift he has given. Any time we use power to feed or elevate ourselves, we fail in our care of the gift.”

Notice that the leadership emphasis is on character and not a position or even specific credentials. This same emphasis on the character of the leader is emphasized in an article titled “The Four Cs of Christian Leadership.” Bruce Winston sufficiently addresses the first three C’s (calling, competence, and confidence), but presents them in a ‘hierarchy’ leading to character:

This paper presented the four Cs of Christian/biblical leadership in a hierarchy of first: Calling, second: Competence, third: Confidence, and fourth: Character. The premise of this paper is that with each successful level of the four Cs, greater success happens.¹¹

Developing the importance of character, Winston points to the list that Paul provides to Timothy, stating that “1 Timothy 3 provides us with the traits and characteristics of a good leader, or overseer.” Notice the emphasis this writer places on the proper use of power, specifically addressing it in terms of not being *pugnacious*. He summarizes Paul’s choice of descriptors as,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Bruce E. Winston, “The Four Cs of Christian Leadership” Regent University News, March 8, 2018 [<https://www.regent.edu/news-events/the-four-cs-of-christian-leadership/>]

...live your life in such a manner that no matter how finely your life is scrutinized, you will not be found “in reproach”... In addition, the passage says that leaders should not be pugnacious *plekteß* (*plektes*), meaning to not be quarrelsome, which is similar to the beatitude “to be meek.” In support of this requirement to not be pugnacious is the requirement to be gentle and peaceable. The passage concludes by indicating that the leader must be seen in a positive light by people outside of the organization.¹²

But, once again, I have to ask if that is what has been shown during the past decade regarding the adopted, or merely accepted, model for Christian ministry and leadership? I think not! Rather, there seems to be an understanding of authority (which assumes power) that is credential based rather than cruciform.

The Cross as the ‘Operating Dynamic’

Because the cross is the means whereby God shattered the enslaving grip of the present evil age and created the church, the cross determines the behavioral patterns and relational practices of new creation communities... God is most clearly revealed in the cruciform Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11), and he triumphs over the powerful anti-God cosmic rulers in the death of Christ (Eph. 1:20-21; 2:13-16).¹³

There are multiple ‘lists’ that could be cited as to how the Christian leader should interact with brothers and sisters in the church family, or even with people outside of the organization. For example, Jade Anna Hughes of the eleven most common verbal abuse patterns that would fall under the category of pugnacious use of power. Included in her list were such behaviors as name-calling, condescension, manipulation, criticism, demeaning comments, threats, blame, and accusations. These are certainly forms of interaction that would serve to divide rather than unite interacting parties.¹⁴

The use of lists, however, seems to be restrictive, rather than something that truly animates the believers. The focus needs to be on developing leadership behavior and ministry practices that enable the church to be shaped in the image of Jesus Christ. Gombis speaks of these as *relational postures* and *modes of relating*.¹⁵ If the cross is truly “the most strategic depiction of how God operates,” than Gombis is correct in stating that it should determine “the mode of life for God’s people who embody God’s presence as the church.”¹⁶ The temptation has always been for the church to adopt what we believe to be “successful” worldly means to accomplish our goals. One prime example of this is how people on both sides of the political spectrum developed relationships and consortiums in the ‘political/social’ realm with those perceived to be powerful and influential people (according to the world’s standards).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gombis, *op. cit.*, 78, 79,

¹⁴ <https://www.joinonelove.org/learn/11-common-patterns-verbal-abuse/>

¹⁵ Gombis, *op. cit.*, 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

The importance of a cruciform approach is that it recognizes that our postures toward others (whether we recognize it or not), our attitudes that seep through with careless words and gestures, and our behaviors – as Gombis stresses – “have the potential to stir up and radiate within relationships wither the dynamics of destruction of the power of the resurrection.”¹⁷ In fact, Gombis will go on to say that “Only cruciform behaviors, postures toward others, speech patterns, and relational dynamics can bear resurrection fruit in community life.”¹⁸ In contrast to what might be entertained elsewhere, cruciformity entails a posture of invitation and asking questions that elicit conversation. There is no attempt to prove one’s case or prove the other to be wrong. The desire of the cruciform leader is to assist the believers “...to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”¹⁹

In terms of the leadership ministry, the image that is created with a cruciform approach is not fostered by means of boasting, especially not as a self-promoter (2 Corinthians 10:13-17). Rather, Paul says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”²⁰ In other words, the image being portrayed is how *unimpressive* he is. In fact, Paul’s credential as an apostle gets reduced to what would be embarrassing to most leaders – “being let down in a basket through a window in the wall” in order to escape alive!²¹

What might be of special significance to the current situation is how Gombis points out that “Paul has resolved not to use *the social medium* of letters to cultivate an image” (emphasis mine).²² So much for the current use of Twitter as a somewhat protected platform. His desire is to let his actions and behavior speak to the truth. This is important because being and behaving in a cruciform manner demands that we place ourselves in the hands of others. It is never easy to confront our fears. Seldom do we want to openly admit our hopes regarding how others will perceive us. But if we are to be truly strong, we must embody an image of weakness.

One of the best developments of a theology of power and weakness is found in Marva J. Dawn’s book *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*. It is a published re-working of the 2000 Schaff Lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.²³ Discussing the use of Greek word *dunamis*, she points out how Paul “frequently conjoins his discussion of God’s power with a recognition of human weakness, *astheneia* (including that of Jesus).”²⁴ And Paul’s use of *astheneia* is distinctive, since in the Gospel’s and Acts the word always refers to sickness. Of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁹ *ESV*, op. cit., Eph 4:1–3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 Cor. 11:30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2 Co 11:33.

²² Gombis, *op. cit.*, 95.

²³ Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

particular interest is Paul’s use of the term in 2 Corinthians 12:9 where, as God’s answer to Paul’s plea for the removal of the thorn in the flesh Paul is told, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”²⁵ Pointing to the work of R.C.H. Lenski, Marva Dawn demonstrates that “...though the verb *teleo* is obviously rich in nuances, it is indeed quite consistent in always being employed to indicate some sort of finishing, completing, ending, or accomplishing—rather than perfecting or maturing of the verb *teleioo*.”²⁶

She goes on to say that in speaking of the relationship of human weakness to God’s power, “The goal is for our power to come to its end.”²⁷ But the question remains as to why this might be the case. The clue for ministry comes in the conclusion of the verse. Paul goes on to say, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”²⁸ Therefore, the weakness of Paul (due to the ‘thorn... in the flesh’ and evidence by his three-fold plea) is resolved by Christ’s power coming to dwell on him (ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ²⁹). The result (v. 10) is that even though Paul is weak, because of Christ power in him and through him, he is strong. Dawn summarizes by comparing this passage with Galatians 2:19-20:

Dying to the law, dying to ourselves, dying to our attempts to use our own power to accomplish God’s purposes are all part of the gospel of grace—the end of ourselves and therefore the possibilities of new life with Christ, in vital union with him.³⁰

Refusing to Submit to Pugnacity

We’ve all seen the news. Power in God’s house has been abused in God’s name by notorious pastors and leaders who have been sexually involved with multiple sheep, who have used money fraudulently, who have been verbally nasty and demeaning and controlling of others... Because the shepherds misused their God-given power (Ezekiel 34:4), failed to care for the wounded sheep, and allowed the flock of Israel to become prey, God removed the flock from their care.³¹

While the focus of her article is determining an appropriate response to the educational initiatives of the “omnicompetent state and irresistible scientific technique” (an identification she borrowed from C.S. Lewis), her chosen responses are still appropriate for responding to the forces producing the great fissure: debates surrounding political partisanship, accusations and denigrating slurs regarding ethnic injustice, and the whole gamut of issues surrounding the ‘pandemic’ and vaccinations. The reason why is her responses can survive the change of issues

²⁵ *ESV*, 2 Corinthians 12:9.

²⁶ Dawn, *Powers*, 40-41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *ESV*, 2 Co 12:9b.

²⁹ *Novum Testamentum Graece, op. cit.*, 2 Corinthians 12:9.

³⁰ Dawn, *Powers*, 45.

³¹ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 126

is that the focus of this paper has not been on what might or might not be a ‘Christian perspective’ regarding the three current issues, but on how a Christian leader (pastor/shepherd, overseer, or elder) is to fulfill their pastoral leadership during the crises. Her suggestions for resisting ‘the poultry-keepers’ are to 1) decide what is necessary and what is wanted, 2) learn more, 3) reason well, and 4) “subvert the poultry-keepers’ agenda.”

My intent is not to misapply her well-written and appropriate essay, but to borrow an excellent suggestion for response. The first three are fairly obvious. Before we speak or take any kind of action as Christian leaders, it is imperative that we know what is needed/necessary in terms of the ‘will of God,’ always be open to learning more about the context and needs, and use proper reasoning. In terms of the fourth suggestion, it sounds more revolutionary than the real suggestion. The call—in terms of the focus of this paper—is to make sure that there are sufficient believers who are in touch with what ‘cruciform living’ is all about and strive to live as imitators of the cross-shaped image of Christ.³²

In terms of the current divide, it is never wrong to start by ensuring that biblical principles, not party or ideology, shape our vision and resulting decisions. As Christian leaders, we should always look to Scripture first as we search for guides for evaluating and prioritizing the issues. But we should always remember that biblical values must transcend any attempt to divide. There must be an attempt to return to a true understanding of ‘tolerance,’ where the truth is always spoken ‘in love’ and our ‘power’ be displayed in terms of weakness.

³² Carrie Birmingham, “Grown Birds and Poultry-Keepers: C.S. Lewis on Education” *Stone-Campbell Journal*, Fall 2020 (Vol. 23, No. 2), 207-224.