



living counter culturally

talk sheet

Power in the Church

Issued by authority of the Territorial Commander

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How should we relate to one another within church communities?



'Where love rules, there is no will to power; and where power predominates, there love is lacking.'

CARL GUSTAV JUNG

'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

JESUS CHRIST

Followers of Jesus are called to love God and love their neighbours. Jesus said that our relationships can mark us out as his. The inevitable implication of this is that if our relationships are not characterised by love then we dishonour Jesus' name.

left the corps and his family to be with her. That Sunday the corps officer spoke to the congregation obliquely about what 'everyone knew' about Sam and Debbie and instructed people not to speak further on this matter. Jenny sat in the congregation listening to what was said.

Carl Jung, a significant pioneer in the field of psychology, suggests that the 'will to power'—the desire to exercise control over another—is the opposite of love. If that is the case, then those who would follow Jesus Christ need to both understand and be aware of power dynamics in all their relationships.

POWER: A few stories¹

Power dynamics are difficult to define. Sometimes they are more easily conveyed in the context of story. As you read the following scenarios, have an eye open for the power dynamics at work in the various inter-personal relationships.

Scenario 1

People thought it was a good thing when Debbie, a teenager from an abusive background, went to board with the family of Salvationists Jenny and Sam. Even when Sam, a leader in the corps, began attending the evening services with Debbie—while Jenny stayed home with their young children—encouragement was given for Debbie's growing interest in faith and worship.

Their corps officer raised the first concern with Sam after a youth leader reported seeing Sam and Debbie alone together in the car several times. Sam's vehement response, that the youth leader should stop gossiping, was further cause for concern. The corps officer determined to handle the matter alone for fear of spreading a negative story unnecessarily.

The congregation was eventually shocked to learn Sam had become involved in a sexual relationship with Debbie. He

Scenario 2

The Fuamosi family (Mum, Dad, four children and Nana) found themselves in financial strife after Dad was made redundant. Mum continued in her night-time cleaning job but her income was not enough to survive on and meet their financial obligations. The Fuamosis were relatively new immigrants without much understanding of the practicalities of hire purchase agreements and personal debt.

Mum needed the car to get to work in the early hours of the morning, but it needed repairs. They were still paying it off and she thought it was under guarantee, but the salesman said they were no longer covered because they had been late with a payment. The family had no choice but to take out a loan for repairs.

They first approached a Salvation Army Community Ministries centre when a friend told them they could get help with food. Staff told them they would have to have budgeting help to qualify for ongoing food assistance. A budget was prepared that covered bill payments at a reduced rate, with the food bank supplementing their limited food supply. Although the food was not really adequate, the Fuamosis seemed to get by.

The last straw came, however, when their car broke down again and the family needed to extend their loan to cover more repairs. Their budget worker was very unhappy at their non-compliance with the agreed budget and said the centre would no longer help them.



Scenario 3

A group of late teens were excited about the possibility of beginning an outreach to kids in their neighbourhood. Their corps officer was supportive. There was a lot of energy among the group and a project was proposed for a series of street BBQs with an invitation back to the hall for games and other activities. A long-term aim was set to determine educational and work-related needs of their target group. The proposal included fundraising ventures as a way for the teens to help the venture become self-funding and to allow contacted kids a chance to participate in supporting the venture.

When the proposal was presented to corps leadership, the corps officer asked youth worker Simon to represent the group and present the proposal. The proposal was resisted by Margaret, an older corps leader who claimed to represent the views of a number of people in the corps. She stated: 'People in the corps don't want this.'

In responding to questions and challenges about the project, Simon challenged Margaret's thinking about possible damage to buildings and harm to young people through perceived 'un-Christian' behaviour of the target group. He hit a brick wall in his explanations and felt he was being seen as rebellious because he wasn't looking up to someone in authority (that is, someone more senior than him because of age).

Scenario 4

Wendy was employed as a bookkeeper at her local Salvation Army centre. She started accountancy studies and became excited about the systems she was introduced to. However, she was also often confused by information coming from the centre's manager, Arthur, who seemed disorganised when it came to paper records. Arthur had been manager since the centre started and had outlasted several accounts people. He was well known for his innovative programmes and had the gift of the gab when it came to convincing prospective donors of the worth of the centre's work.

Arthur was often away from the centre and had a practice of getting cheques pre-signed by the accounts person so that he could make purchases while out and about. Wendy was uncomfortable about pre-signing cheques, which went against her training. She tried to discuss with Arthur alternative ways of paying for goods, but was shocked at the strength of his reaction against her ideas. She felt intimidated when he shouted at her. Arthur implied that her employment was in question if she did not 'toe the line'; he was her manager, not her polytech tutor.

Scenario 5

Joanna was an intelligent yet shy person. Her husband, Mark, was held in high regard by some members of their local corps for taking his role as 'spiritual head of the family' so seriously. He managed the family finances carefully and expected to be kept fully informed of his wife's activities during the day while he was at work. Their children behaved well and were actively involved in corps life. Joanna took to heart Mark's expectation that she would defer to him in most decisions.

However, Joanna was unhappy and could not understand why she could not get 'victory' over her feelings. An acquaintance from her children's school suggested she might need medical help for depression. This was after the woman had noticed Joanna was becoming more and more unkempt. She approached Joanna after noticing her crying over a minor matter.

Mark was also unhappy with Joanna and increasingly felt he had to 'discipline' her verbally. He did not agree with Joanna going to a doctor because he she had no physical ailment. In his opinion, all she needed to do was follow his guidance and that of Ephesians 5:22,24, which he said described how to be a good wife and a victorious Christian. Mark would take care of everything else, he said.

POWER: What do you mean by that?

Before we think about the issues raised by these stories, it might be helpful to define some of the words that we'll be using in this discussion. You may not agree with the definitions provided here. If you're working through this Talk Sheet in a group setting, try not to get bogged down discussing these definitions or trying to improve on them.

One way of defining power is to observe that, in any given situation, **the person with power is the one who determines what is going to happen.** Or, putting it another way, power is the 'capability to achieve specific goals or objectives'.² Power, then, is the **ability** to do something, to assert one's will, or to determine that something will happen.

Closely related to the concept of power is that of **authority.** Authority is not so much about the ability to determine what is going to happen, but about the **right** to do so. Being in a position of authority within a group, for example, might mean that a designated leader has the right to make a final decision when the group cannot agree.

Of course, it is possible to have authority without power. It is equally possible to wield power without the authority (the right) to do so.

Defined simply as ability, power is a morally-neutral concept; power itself is neither good nor bad. **It is the when, how and why of the exercise of power that determines its moral quality.** Power exercised without proper authority or in defiance of legitimate authority is wrong. Some means of determining what is going to happen are morally bankrupt; just because we are able to do something does not mean that it should be done. Even if we have the right to determine what will happen, it does not mean that every action taken to achieve our goals is legitimate.

Authority, too, is morally neutral. But its validity will depend on whether, and by whom, authority has been granted. Who has legitimate authority—and why—will vary from situation to situation. In a church setting with formal leadership structures, there are usually clearly defined lines of authority. Self-assumed authority is almost certainly of dubious moral quality.

Power, especially as we are thinking about it in the context of the church, **is all about relationships between people.** It's therefore important to consider how we relate to one another within the church: *Who has authority* (the right to determine what is going to happen)? *Who has the power* (the ability to determine what is going to happen)? *What ends are appropriate* (the why questions)? And *what means are appropriate* for achieving them (the how questions)?

POWER: What's going on here?

Let's revisit those earlier stories and consider the relationships at work in each scenario. *Consider who is exercising power in these relationships and for what purpose?*

1 Sam clearly abused his position. But the corps officer also failed by handling the situation alone without consulting other leaders, and by attempting to control the situation through inappropriate public statements rather than following a more suitable process.

2 The Salvation Army budget worker is in a position of power in this relationship. Lack of action (for example: possible advocacy with the finance company, and with the car company over rights under the Consumer Guarantees Act) and the decision not to continue working with the client has disempowered the family and left them vulnerable. The decision to withhold further resources, such as food, and not to review the family budget demonstrates a lack of grace and also limits the chance to continue coaching this family.

3 Both Margaret and the corps officer have misused their power. Margaret by assuming that she has the right to determine the outcome to this proposal; she is inferring that she has a level of power and authority that is not to be questioned, especially by a younger person. It is possible that the corps officer has also failed to use the power he or she has to create a more supportive environment for Simon and the younger people.

4 Arthur has abused his position of authority over Wendy; this includes his shouting at her. Wendy has noticed a problem but Arthur has turned this around so that Wendy has become 'the problem'. Behind this are other issues relating to organisational power: it is possible that Arthur's line manager has neglected his or her responsibilities by not sufficiently monitoring or addressing Arthur's professional shortcomings, or by not making Wendy aware of how to appropriately address these issues.

5 Joanna is subject to a husband who is using isolated Bible texts to control her. This is compounded by Mark being held up as a good example within the corps, reinforcing a pattern of thinking that takes away Joanna's right to direct her own wellbeing.

POWER: What does the Bible say?

From a biblical perspective, all power and authority belongs to God as the creator, preserver and governor of all things. Human authority—and the exercise of power—is legitimate only insofar as it is understood as delegated stewardship from God (**Genesis 1:26-28**).

The Bible contains some clear and simple instruction about how this stewardship should be regarded. For those with authority, the instruction is to use it for God's purposes (**Matthew 20:25-28**, **1 Peter 5:2-3**). For those under the authority of another, the instruction is to respect that authority (**Hebrews 13:17**, **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a**).

While the Bible makes some direct statements about power and authority, the same principles are also illustrated in biblical stories.

Saul and David

Saul was delegated God's authority to act as the first king over Israel. He was authorised to act on God's behalf for the good of the nation. His kingly powers existed for that purpose; however, Saul lost sight of this fact and began to trust his own judgment and to act from selfish motives. As a result, God withdrew the authority that established Saul's right to act (**1 Samuel 15:10, 16:1**).

Saul desperately clung to his position and used his power to attack David, whom he perceived as a threat. David still maintained respect for Saul and, on more than one occasion, refused to use the power that he had to harm Saul (**1 Samuel 24 and 26**). David recognised that he had no authority to use his power to force the outcome of events. Even so, he could still respectfully question the way Saul was treating him (**1 Samuel 26:18**).

David later had his own struggles with inappropriate use of the power associated with his kingly authority. His taking of Bathsheba as his lover and the murder of her husband, Uriah, testify to the temptations that power and authority present. Like Saul, David forgot that power is to be used only for God's purposes. He instead used it for self-gratification (**2 Samuel 11 and 12**).

Jesus

In the gospels, Jesus clearly has power. Over and over again he is portrayed as one who has the ability to make things happen. Jesus forgave sins, he healed physical illness, and he changed the course of people's lives. But the way that Jesus made things happen is significant.

Jesus' question to blind Bartimaeus: 'What do you want me to do for you?' (**Mark 10:51**) is a good example. Bartimaeus is a partner in his own healing, which occurs at Jesus' invitation.

The pattern is repeated in many places: Jesus responds to the brazen faith of four friends (**Mark 2:1ff**), to the impassioned plea of a synagogue ruler (**Mark 5:21ff**), to the secret touch of a desperate woman (**Mark 5:25ff**), even to the impertinent bargaining of a Gentile mother (**Mark 7:24**). In none of these situations is it Jesus alone who determines what will happen. Jesus' way is the way of invitation; not compulsion, coercion or manipulation.

With his disciples, Jesus seems more direct: he sent them out (**Mark 6:7**), he made them get into a boat (**Mark 6:45**), he gave orders to prepare for a Passover meal (**Mark 14:13ff**). Even the call to discipleship sounds like a command: 'Come, follow me!' (**Mark 1:17**). And yet there are those who refuse the invitation to follow (**Luke 9:58ff**), and there are disciples who, having begun to follow, turn and walk away (**John 6:66**).

It seems that Jesus' orders are an invitation to obey, but where obedience does not follow there is no compulsion, no coercion and no manipulation.

Biblical principles

The Biblical principles seem clear: those **with authority** must exercise power as a stewardship from God; they are not to 'lord it over' those for whom they are responsible, but to seek the good of others at all times. (**Mark 10:42-43**)

Those **under authority** should also exercise the power they do have as a stewardship from God; their power should be used to support those who exercise legitimate authority within the church (**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**, **Hebrews 13:17**).

Power must never be used for selfish purposes (**Romans 2:8**, **1 Corinthians 13:5**, **Philippians 2:3**, **James 3:16**). On the other hand, God's people are exhorted to 'defend the cause' of those without power (**Psalms 82:3**, **Isaiah 1:17**, **James 1:27**). The command to 'maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed' implies an 'oppressor' or an oppressive system, which must be resisted. While Jesus speaks against forceful resistance in one's own defence (**Matthew 5:39**), active resistance against oppressive evil is exhorted elsewhere (**James 4:7**, **1 Peter 5:9**).

Jesus is the ultimate example of power under control. When we consider his example we see that humility is an essential characteristic of faithful Christian leadership (see **Philippians 2:3-8**, especially verse 3):

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

**Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!**

ENDNOTES:

1. These are composite stories of fictional characters based on real experiences.
2. R.K. Harrison (Gen ed). Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), p 319.

FOR DISCUSSION

Think of a Christian group to which you belong. Can you identify who has legitimate authority within that group? How has that authority been established?

- Has it been conferred by God?

- Has it been granted by the church structure?

- Was it by the consensus of the group?

In what ways do you submit to that authority?

In what ways might you be tempted to use your power to resist that authority?

It is always easier for us to recognise those we think are exercising power over us; it is more difficult to recognise when our power over others might be considered a threat.

- In which of your relationships do you have power over others? Can you identify any situations where your relationship to others has been more about power than about love?

When others have power over you, does that mean you are powerless? How might you react in Christian love to those who you perceive as exercising power over you inappropriately?

What might you do differently as a result of reflecting on the issues raised by this Talk Sheet?

'If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favour: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.'

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4 (The Message)

M.A.S.I.C.

Background

The Moral and Social Issues (Ethics) Council (MASIC) studies and formulates Salvation Army responses on significant moral, religious and social issues. Its aim is to help The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga Territory take a proactive stance in relation to such issues, and to support Salvationist decision-making in everyday life.

MASIC 'Living Counter Culturally' Talk Sheets are intended as Internal Discussion and Resource documents for Salvationists. They provide biblical and theological reflection on the intersection of faith in the everyday world.

The 'Ethical Life'

The 'ethical life' is the Christ-like life. Through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, our broken relationship with God is restored. We are then able to grow more and more like Christ, our Saviour and Lord. His words and example and the teaching of the Bible help us in this journey.

Growth in Christlikeness is expressed in the integrity of our character (who we are), in our ethics (the choices we make) and in our lifestyle (our actions). We live a Christ-like ethical life in our everyday activities when there is a clear synergy between the leading of the Holy Spirit and our own choices:

'Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.' (Galatians 5:25)

Growth in Christlikeness requires us to stand against evil and sin. We find the strength to do this through spiritual disciplines of prayer (including confession) and Bible reading, as well as through accountability to other Christians. Christlikeness can be evident in all aspects of our life, including our social concern for others.

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