

# IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP POWER ABUSE AND ITS PREVENTION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the aspect of leadership power abuse in the local churches.<sup>1</sup> Since data on power abuse in the local churches is unavailable, the writer's supportive data will be mostly circumstantial, based on personal observation, and from findings elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The writer believes that power abuse may be quite pervasive, and yet a *best kept secret* in the local churches, for the simple reason that the incidences have not been researched and exposed.

The discussion is divided to three sections. The first part describes some hints of power abuse occurring in local churches. The section also attempts to define how leadership power abuse is understood in this discussion. Section two identifies and compares non-Christian and Christian power bases. This is important for understanding the power values individuals may assume, as they take up church leadership responsibility. Part three explores Jesus' attitude towards power, and the use of power in His life and ministry. It submits that Jesus provides the model for understanding and the usage of power by church leaders, in the context of local churches today. In the final

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has specific concern for local churches within the United Church-Bougainville Region, but the subject matter has implications for the broader Christian church in the region as well.

<sup>2</sup> Almost entirely from the USA and British Isles, as represented by books in the Bibliography.

section, the writer proposes a number of guiding principles to aid local churches to minimise or prevent power abuse from occurring. The writer has his denomination especially in mind as he tries to reflect on this significant issue.

## **IDENTIFYING FORMS OF POWER ABUSE BY THE CHURCH**

### **LEADERS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT**

This section suggests some of the ways leaders can abuse power, in the context of a local church. As the local church is entrusted with a gospel of freedom, this could be undermined by the threat of power abuse.

#### ***Defining Power-Abuse***

In order to understand how the compound term *power abuse* is used in the context of this discussion, it is important to define the term at the outset. For simplicity sake, the words *power* and *abuse* will be dealt with separately, before a summary definition is offered.

#### *Power*

The American Center for Leadership Studies (ACLS) defines “power” as “the means by which the leader actionally gains the compliance of the follower(s)”.<sup>3</sup> Rollo May offers another definition of power. He describes it as the “the ability to cause or prevent change”.<sup>4</sup> Another theorist, Roy Oswald, states “that power relates to individuals’ ability to accomplish things outside or above the authority given to them in roles”.<sup>5</sup>

In all three definitions, action verbs, such as, “compliance”, “cause”, “prevent”, or “accomplish”, appear with frequency. This means that the idea of *action* is central to the understanding of power.<sup>6</sup> In these verbs,

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Paul Beasley-Murray, *Power for God Sake: Power and Abuse in the Local Church*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1998, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Rollo May, *Power and Innocent: A Search for Sources of Violence*, Glasgow UK: Fontana/Collins, 1976, pp. 99 -110.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Oswald, *Power Analysis of a Congregation*, Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 1981, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Thomas, citing David H. Burnham, “Inside the Mind of the World-Class Leader”, white paper, Boston MA: Burnham Rosen Group, [http://www.burhamrosn.com/Publications/Inside\\_the\\_Mind.html](http://www.burhamrosn.com/Publications/Inside_the_Mind.html), identifies three distinctive orientations to power which are designated “personal”, “institutional”, and “interactive”. Of the three, the third is the

moreover, the idea of *duress* is implied.<sup>7</sup> The basic meaning of the term “power”, then, is *exertion of pressure or influence on subordinates, so that a desired outcome is achieved*.

In the context of local churches, then, power is *the leaders’ ability to get followers do those things, which bring God glory, and enhance both their temporal and eternal welfare*. What makes power usage in the church context particularly complex and risky is the potential for leaders to wield it as if it is entirely their divine right to do so.

### *Abuse*

What about the term “abuse”? Johnson and VanVonderen define *abuse* by comparing a functional, healthy family with a dysfunctional, unhealthy family situation.

In a healthy, functional family system, the parents occupy a place of authority, in order to provide need-meeting relationships, experiences, and messages to the children. Here, parents affirm the personhood of their children, while, at the same time, becoming ever-wiser in their ability to give appropriate consequences for wrong behaviour, and teach and encourage in right behaviour. . . . On the other hand, when a parent uses his or her position to force the children to perform, or uses too-harsh standard to judge by, or uses the position of power to gratify his or her own needs – for importance, power, emotional, or even sexual, gratification – then the parent has crossed the line into abuse. . . . Likewise, those in spiritual positions of authority can violate our trust. It’s possible to become so determined to defend a

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preferred one. The first orientation is often self-centred and coercive, whilst the second focuses solely on what benefits the institution, and generally disregards the interest of the followers. The “interactive” leader harnesses the potentials of subordinates to an end purpose by simultaneously focusing on their own interest and concerns. In this case, power influence flows both ways. Robert J. Thomas, *The Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader*, Boston MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008, pp. 101, 102.

<sup>7</sup> This duress is described as “power-distance”. See James E. Plueddemann’s description of “power-distance” in chapter 6 of James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2009, pp. 92-109.

spiritual place of authority, a doctrine, or a way of doing things, that you wound and abuse anyone who questions, disagrees, or does not “behave” spiritually the way you want them to. When your words and actions tear down another, or attack or weaken a person’s standing as a Christian – to gratify you, your position, or your beliefs, while, at the same time, weakening or harming another – that is spiritual abuse.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, power abuse occurs in the local church context when church leaders resort to unjust means, such as, misrepresenting scripture, manipulation, fear tactics, or even outright use of physical force, to coerce their followers into doing their bidding, so that their self-interests are appeased or complied with. Is such behaviour occurring in the local church contexts? If this is the case, then church leadership is abusing power

## **INDICATIONS OF ABUSE OF POWER**

The writer believes that, although power abuse is not readily reported, it may be a common occurrence in local churches. The magnitude of nominalism<sup>9</sup> must compel one to ask whether it is contributing significantly to the problem? The writer is of the opinion that what is touted as leadership in local churches is, more or less, power abusive activity, which only promotes a gospel of self-interest, and not the true gospel of Christ. This being the case, what then are some of the more obvious signs of power abuse in local churches?

### ***Leaders Playing God***

One of the ways power abuse is carried out is when church leaders play God before their followers.<sup>10</sup> Church leaders often flaunt their personal opinions

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<sup>8</sup> David Johnson, and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognising and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church*, Minneapolis MN: Bethany House, 1991, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> This issue has been raised by a number of indigenous writers, such as Joshua Daimoi, Kewai Kero, and Wayne Kendi, to name three. The writer has also dealt with the issue, to a certain extent, in his BTh thesis, which was reproduced in Abel Haon, “The Church Impacting Melanesia: a Case for People-Centred and Participatory Ministry”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 24-1 (2008), pp. 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> This is often referred to as “power posturing”. See Johnson, and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, pp. 63-64.

and impressions, so that they become equal with God's. Statements such as "God said this to me", or "God has revealed this to me", can be so innocent, yet misleading.

Donald Bongbong refers to this danger, when he quips: "[I]t (i.e., church leadership) presumes everything it does is good and acceptable. Furthermore, it is hard for the church to critically analyse religious programmes; since everything is done for God, and is presumed, unquestionably, to be suitable and acceptable."<sup>11</sup>

The writer has personally observed how one prominent church leader (a clergyman) intimated that God had spoken to him about contesting the local government elections. God even hinted that he was going to win. Strangely, another clergyman from the gentleman's village, lobbying for his relation, who was contesting the same seat, was also explicitly telling the constituents that God has revealed to him that his relation must run for the elections. Sadly, both lost. The question is: Was God conveying two sets of contradictory messages to these clergymen at the same time? To cap it off, both clergymen were vying for the votes of their bewildered followers.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Leaders Using Coercion***

Power abuse also involves an inappropriate use of authority in the church. Scripture can often be used to bolster this. Since most people in local churches are marginally literate, it is relatively easy for this to occur. Scriptural authority provides church leaders with the basis for effecting power action in the church. Unfortunately, power action can easily exceed what is authorised by scripture. For instance, it is relatively easy for church leaders use their rank to impose certain lifestyle values on their followers; values not explicitly stated in scripture.<sup>13</sup> Carol Bulkeley issues an

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Bongbong, "Improving Administration in the West Buka United Church", BTh thesis, Banz PNG: Christian Leaders' Training College, 2008, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> This occurred in 2010, during the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) elections. The church leader lost the election. Sadly, the other clergy's candidate also lost. Both are now back ministering in the church, after being disciplined for a year.

<sup>13</sup> A very simple example is church leaders using the pulpit to advocate preference for a particular dress code. Long black pants and white tie is then equated with holiness. Apparently, in some cases, this issue has been pushed to the extreme, so that congregations have broken up a result.

important warning: “At the heart of all abuse is the misuse of power. It is about relating in ways, which, in some way, diminish the other, rendering them, to some degree, impotent and powerless.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Leaders Using Suppression***

Most ordinary believers in local churches do not know their particular gift-mix, which is why their gift is underused. Perhaps this may be due to simple ignorance. But, in most cases, the laity is simply suppressed. Referring to how church structure contributes to perpetrating this unhealthy state, Bongbong remarks: “A pyramid-type structure that has one person at the top consequently promotes colonialism [sic], and a paternalistic spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Followers are expected to sit quietly through the church service, Sunday after Sunday. Often, the only meaningful contribution they are expected to offer is from their pockets or purses.<sup>16</sup> Truly participating, as members of the body of Christ, is simply not an option. This can be excused where believers are fairly-recent converts. But, in most cases, believers, who have been converts for decades, are still unable to contribute meaningfully to the work of the gospel, as maturing disciples of Jesus Christ.

### ***Leaders Withholding Knowledge***

Finally, another problem in the local church is that many believers possess a shallow understanding of God’s word, even after years of ministry. This is most noticeable when believers show a careless attitude towards what they profess in their daily lives.<sup>17</sup> Sadly, the teachings of scripture are presented as mostly matters of the mind, application is convoluted, and, therefore,

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<sup>14</sup> Carol Bulkeley, personal communication to Paul Beasley-Murray, in Beasley-Murray, *Power for God’s Sake*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Bongbong, “Improving Administration in the West Buka United Church”, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Teaching on tithing and giving are expansive in local churches. In the United church, particularly, a variety of emphases, related to giving, has brought about a great deal of confusion. The result is that many have ceased giving altogether.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Williams, commenting in the 1970s about the emergence of indigenous leadership to facilitate a maturing national church, stated: “Just as importantly, these men have endeavoured to help people realise they are the Church, and emphasised a teaching ministry to equip the people to participate and share fully in its leadership and life”, Ronald G. Williams, *The United Church in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands: the Development of an Indigenous Church*, Rabaul PNG: Trinity Press, 1972, p. 278. This writer, however, believes that, over time, the laity has tended to become more dependent on the clergy, instead of learning to explore the Christian faith for themselves.

unable to transform life.<sup>18</sup> Such situations resemble the use of scripture by the Pharisees and Sadducees, to prevent ordinary believers from accessing their leadership domain, or questioning their authority.<sup>19</sup> In opposition, Jesus pithily remarked: “It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”<sup>20</sup> If a significant number of ordinary believers are still biblically illiterate, after years of ministry, what is the problem? Is this a deliberate ploy to keep followers dependent on the leaders?

## SUMMARY

This section has attempted to show that leadership power abuse is very real, and, perhaps, even quite a common occurrence in local churches. Four examples have been suggested to try to help Christians in identifying the problem. Also, a definition of the compound term of *power abuse* has been proposed, to try to describe its use in this paper.

## DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN NON-CHRISTIAN AND CHRISTIAN POWER BASES

Leadership power abuse is often a joint venture. Leaders may wield power selfishly, but quite often this power abuse is encouraged through the ignorance of their followers. To prevent power abuse, followers must be alert and discerning.

The situation can be complicated by the ways different cultures and religions understand and deal with the concept of power. A number of researchers<sup>21</sup> have uncovered the fact that cultures and religions tend to gravitate, more or less, towards power. Theorists have coined the terms “high power-

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<sup>18</sup> Professor Tippett noted the problem in his research work back in the mid-1960s. This situation appears to have not changed significantly since then, Alan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity: A Study in Growth and Obstruction*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 302.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 23:1-4.

<sup>20</sup> Matt 10:24, 25. All scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) by the International Bible Society, 1984, except where otherwise indicated.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Bass and Ruth Bass identify a total of 8,000 references related to leadership research work, Bernard Bass, and Ruth Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Management*, 4th edn, New York NY: Free Press, 2008.

distance”, and “low power-distance”<sup>22</sup> to differentiate these alternating tendencies.

GLOBE<sup>23</sup> research indicates that, in Christendom, leadership values seem to have been influenced in two opposite ways. “Many would argue that early Christianity valued low power-distance leadership. Before Christianity became an imperial religion, both leadership and theology were decentralised. Gradually, church leadership grew in influence, until it held power over the head-of-state.”<sup>24</sup> The Reformers reacted to this by emphasising the authority of scripture, and the priesthood of all believers, over against tradition and church hierarchy.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted, also, that cultural power values will continue to affect the way Christians understand leadership, and vice versa, hence, the *power-distance* concept is a significant variable, where power is exercised in potentially abusive ways. It is essential, therefore, to briefly explore the non-Christian and Christian<sup>26</sup> power bases, in order to better understand the situation.

## **NON-CHRISTIAN POWER BASES**

Numerous power bases have been proposed in non-Christian contexts.<sup>27</sup> However, space does not permit identifying every category, at this stage. For argument’s sake, it will be sufficient to mention four of the more-common ones, in the context of Bougainville.

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<sup>22</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, pp. 92-109, citing Robert J. House, et al, eds, *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> An acronym for [G]lobal [L]eadership and [O]rganisational [B]ehaviour [E]ffectiveness.

<sup>24</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Or “biblical”. In some cases this distinction is difficult to establish as cultural values have so shaped the perception of power, even in the church context. However, as the writer will try to show later, the biblical bases of power stand apart from a non-Christian understanding of the bases of power.

<sup>27</sup> Both religious and non-religious. But the term “non-religious” is a misnomer, because religion pervades every sphere of life, in the Bougainville context.

### ***Role/Function***

First and foremost, a leader's power is derived from the role he or she<sup>28</sup> assumes in an institution. The individual is able to command influence over others, because it is functionally<sup>29</sup> expected in the role he or she is assigned. In traditional societies, leadership was mostly ascribed and processed this way. This remains true in the present, where individuals are accorded respect, because of the roles they perform in their communities.

### ***Hereditary Prestige***

Secondly, in Bougainville, traditional leadership is inherited.<sup>30</sup> Individuals possess or obtain power by virtue of being born into a chiefly or prominent family. In this situation, the degree of power possessed by hereditary leadership is relative to the *power-distance* continuum subscribed to by individual communities. Hereditary leadership in Bougainville is generally low power-distance.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Wealth***

Thirdly, as was generally true for our traditional societies in the past, but is more so in the present, wealth does play a pivotal role in accessing or acquiring power.<sup>32</sup> In more traditional societies, anyone who accumulated

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<sup>28</sup> Most societies in Bougainville are matrilineal, and so, the womenfolk have significant leadership influence in their communities.

<sup>29</sup> James Lawrence uses the term "function", James Lawrence, *Growing Leaders: Cultivating Disciples for Yourself and Others*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> This true for both matrilineal and patrilineal societies. In the Solos area of Buka, from where the writer comes, the hereditary head man is called *na tsiunaun*, and the hereditary head woman is called *na hahine*. The government administration has recognised the importance of hereditary leadership, and has incorporated it as part of its governing institution, at the community level.

<sup>31</sup> The leadership style in Siwai, South Bougainville, seems to be the exception. It can be considered a relatively high-power-distance leadership style. This view is supported by anthropologist Douglas Oliver, in his research work in the area, Douglas L. Oliver, *A Solomon Island Society: Kinship and Leadership Among the Siuai (Bougainville) People*, Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1967.

<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, it is also true that power is used to amass wealth. The more wealth one can amass, the more power and reputation he or she accrues, so on, and so forth. This a recurring cycle. Bruce Shield's article offers good insights into how Melanesians view power, and how it is essential to leadership, Bruce Shields, *Melanesian and Biblical Concepts of Power*, Tari PNG: Bruce Shields, nd.

more perishable goods was regarded as being powerful.<sup>33</sup> Presently, especially in politics, money is used as a means to access power. This is true, whether leadership is assumed directly or not. James' warning about the practice of partiality and favouritism, resulting from wealth, is very appropriate indeed.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Knowledge (Esoteric)***

Fourthly, possessing knowledge, especially esoteric knowledge, can be a means of gaining significant influence and prestige in the eyes of people. This may involve the ability to interpret omens, or control nature, and to carry out sorcery<sup>35</sup> practices. Traditionally, such secret/sacred knowledge was inherited, but was also acquired through a variety of ways.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, such knowledge could help one to gain excess power from creation spirits,<sup>37</sup> and the living-dead.<sup>38</sup> The more one had access to such knowledge, the more prestige, power, and wealth he or she acquired. Knowledgeable individuals were leaders in their own right.<sup>39</sup>

### **BIBLICAL POWER BASES**

If the above represents the bases of power for non-Christian leadership, what then of Christian leadership? The writer submits that Christian leadership derives from two complementary bases – scripture, and the indwelling Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The late Professor Narokobi makes allusion to this in his discussion of leadership in the context of Papua New Guinea. Bernard Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies University of the South Pacific, 1983, esp. pp. 9-15. This issue is dealt with quite comprehensively by Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1984.

<sup>34</sup> James 2:1-4. This is especially so when stewardship teaching overemphasises monetary giving.

<sup>35</sup> In Bougainville, only sorcery is believed to have been practised. *Sanguma* appears to be a recent phenomenon.

<sup>36</sup> Either as a direct gift from the ancestors, for instance, or through a personal power encounter with spirits; perhaps even through dreams and visions.

<sup>37</sup> As in the form of *mana* for healing or for casting and/or warding off spells.

<sup>38</sup> Dead ancestors, who continue to exist in the realm of the dead.

<sup>39</sup> Shields, *Melanesian and Biblical Concepts of Power*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>40</sup> I know that this is not satisfactory to other Christians, as they would want to add a further category, namely "Church traditions". As an evangelical, I will beg to differ. I

### *The Authority of Scripture*

The dissenting cry of *sola scriptura* affirms the first biblical power base. Incidentally, this rallying cry was a reaction to leadership power abuse.<sup>41</sup> For Protestantism, and especially for Evangelicals, the authority of scripture must remain the basis for Godly authority and spiritual power. This authoritative privilege is attributed to scripture, because it alone speaks truthfully about God, mankind, and creation.

### *Humility*

The task of the leader, as an interpreter of God's word, is to expound the scriptures as clearly as possible, so they are understood and responded to accordingly. But the leader, and his or her audience, are on an equal footing before the scriptures, and must listen with open and expectant hearts, and with much prayer. Even though the leader has a privileged task of studying and interpreting God's word, he or she must never try to equate God's word with his or her own interpretation. As Pope Gregory iterated: "A leader is only a servant of God, above all else."<sup>42</sup>

### *Discipline*

Further, the leader must deploy all the appropriate skills and techniques available, to ascertain the accurate meaning of scripture. This is hard work, but Paul's warning about correctly handling God's word, is timeless.<sup>43</sup> This warning only makes sense in the context of sloppiness, and of imposing one's own views into scripture.

## **HOLY SPIRIT**

Secondly, the Holy Spirit provides the other basis for Christian authority and power. Since, He originally inspired the writers of scripture; He also authenticates the authoritative ring of scripture, giving it life and power, so

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believe that, based on careful exegesis, we are realistically only presented with these two complementary bases.

<sup>41</sup> By leading Reformers, such as Martin Luther, in the 15th century, and John Calvin, in the 16th century.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Strawbridge, citing Pope Gregory's remark about the servant nature of true Christian leadership, Jennifer Strawbridge, "The Word of the Cross: Mission, Power, and the Theology of Leadership", in *Anglican Theological Review* 9-1 (2003), p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Tim 3:15.

that it becomes a double-edged sword, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.<sup>44</sup>

On the eve of His departure, Jesus pledged the Holy Spirit to His disciples, to help them in the task of world mission. “But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>45</sup> The Holy Spirit, then, is the true leader in the work of God’s mission on earth. He provides direction, the gifts-mix, and empowers the church to carry out this mission.

How vital it is for the Holy Spirit to energise the leader in his or her role in the local church. But human power and scheming must yield completely, before the Spirit’s enabling power can be experienced in its fullness. Anyone who attempts to lead God’s people, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, is simply an abusive hireling.<sup>46</sup>

## **SUMMARY**

This section has dealt with both non-Christian and Christian leadership power bases. These power bases make followers compliant with their leaders. Four non-Christian bases have been suggested as examples. For Evangelicals, especially, the Christian leader’s power base must consist entirely of scripture and the Holy Spirit.

## **JESUS: HIS LEADERSHIP AND ATTITUDE TO POWER**

Jesus was the epitome of power, but He also provides the only true and enduring model of leadership for Christians. Both leadership and power blended harmoniously in His person and ministry. In the Gospels, Jesus is described as launching into His ministry in the power of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> He is constantly described in the Gospels as one who taught with authority.<sup>48</sup> His ability to suspend the laws of nature, and to expel diseases and demons, are evidences of power in His ministry.<sup>49</sup> However, even though Jesus possessed

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<sup>44</sup> Heb 4:12

<sup>45</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>46</sup> John 10:12, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Luke 4:14.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Matt 7:28; Mark 1:27; Luke 4:36.

<sup>49</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex, and Power: the Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1985, p. 213.

unlimited power and authority, He was never on a power trip.<sup>50</sup> Jesus had complete control over power itself, because His life was guided by loftier motives. Thus, He was able exercise power in the most liberating ways possible.

### **POWER TO GLORIFY GOD**

Jesus' loftiest goal was to bring glory to God the Father, through His life and ministry on earth. His use of authority and power was employed towards this transcending goal. As the old, wicked order was being wrenched back, and evil shattered, by the humble Servant, God's glory was being proclaimed, loud and clear. As proof that He had satisfactorily accomplished this goal, He could confidently affirm before His Father, in the hearing of His disciples: "I have brought glory to You on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do. And now Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began."<sup>51</sup>

### **POWER FOR SERVICE**

Subsequent to the motive of glorifying God, was Christ's concern for needy humanity.<sup>52</sup> Jesus was moved by compassionate love for needy humanity. Men, women, and children were lost like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>53</sup> Thus, He deployed His divine authority and power for the service of humanity.

#### ***A Servant***

At the core of Jesus' leadership was the characteristic aspect of *servanthood*. Jesus understood most intimately that power can only serve its true purpose when it is given away. This can only occur in the context of service to needy humanity. On the final night with His disciples, Jesus vividly characterised this core value by replacing His outer garment with a towel, so that He could stoop to wash their feet. "The foot-washing makes it

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<sup>50</sup> Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992, p. 210.

<sup>51</sup> John 17:4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this should be understood simply as the reverse side of Jesus glorifying God. God is glorified through Jesus' serving needy humanity, cf. Luke 10:27.

<sup>53</sup> Matt 11:28-30.

clear that serving others, far from promoting the interest of self, involves promoting the interest of others.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***A Shepherd***

Jesus’ leadership was also *pastoral*. He characterised Himself a shepherd: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus deployed power to tend and care for wounded humanity. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and consoled the bereaved. He did not hoard power, on the contrary, He was the greatest empowerer.

### ***A Steward***

Another concept that characterises the leadership style of Jesus is that of a *steward*. As the true steward, Jesus was bringing to the people both new and old treasures, contrary to the religious leaders of His day, who were only imposing their legalism.<sup>56</sup> Paul has this same idea in mind when he described the leader’s one main responsibility, in his first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>57</sup> As a model leader, Jesus characterised this power-giving leadership fully, by sharing God’s divine secrets with needy humanity.

## **POWER TO DEMOLISH EVIL**

Finally, Jesus’ use of power was directed at destroying the evil powers, which have long captivated the bodies, minds, and spirits of humanity. Even though some of those powers were originally created *good* by God, they had assumed an evil disposition, because of their rebellion. Since time immemorial, such powers have been working to thwart God’s purposes. Nevertheless, they have now been categorically defeated by Christ at the Cross.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Power for God’s Sake*, p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> John 10:11.

<sup>56</sup> Matt 15:52.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Cor 4:2.

<sup>58</sup> Col 2:15. Incidentally, the cross is the mark of great humility and defeat. God, however, in His wisdom, brought about the defeat of the malevolent host, through what appeared to be the most pitiful event of all.

## **Death**

The Bible calls death a power.<sup>59</sup> It is a coercive power, which has imposed its venom on the entire human race.<sup>60</sup> Humanity is subjected to death and decay, as a result of sin. The good news is, however, that the source of death, sin, has already been dealt a terminal blow, through Christ's sacrificial death. By His resurrection, Christ has also proved that death is a defeated foe, and will be completely eradicated when He returns for His people.

## **The Satanic host**

As with His victory over death, Jesus employed self-giving power to triumph over the wicked spiritual host.<sup>61</sup> However, His use of power was a complete reversal of how these evil powers had been perverting power, since their rebellion. Instead of a crude display of power, Jesus subjected Himself entirely to the Spirit's control.<sup>62</sup> This attitude of humility completely decimated Satan and his evil cohorts.

## **SUMMARY**

This section has explored the basic values, inherent in Jesus' leadership. Even though Jesus was a man full of authority and power, He was never on a "power trip", so to speak. His use of power was utterly self-giving. Three supervening thoughts were uppermost in the mind of Jesus, in relation to His use of power: God's great Name, needy humanity, and the dislodging of evil powers.

## **STEPS FOR AVOIDING POWER ABUSE PITFALLS IN THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP CONTEXT**

Allan Hirsch warns, "It is precisely because of human nature that we should be wary of such power in human hands. It almost always corrupts, and damages the relational fabric that constitutes the church."<sup>63</sup> This warning about the corrupting use of power in the church is such an appropriate one

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<sup>59</sup> Rom 6:12, cf. 1 Cor 15:55, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Rom 5:12.

<sup>61</sup> Phil 2:5-11.

<sup>62</sup> Matt 12:28.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2006, p. 165.

for this discussion. What practical aid can then be offered to prevent or minimise the problem of power abuse in the local churches?

In this final section, we present a number of guidelines for church leaders, and their followers, to consider, in order to minimise power abuse. They are offered in outline form only. However, it is hoped they will set the stage for further reflection on what could be an undiscussed, but pervasive, problem in the church.

1. Leaders must lead, to the glory of God. The chief goal of church leadership is to give glory to God. This motive is paramount, regardless of the style of leadership one attempts to employ in the church.
2. Leaders must be subject to the control of the Holy Spirit, and answerable to God's Word. Power-giving leadership is completely dependent on the Holy Spirit, and must be subjected to God's Word, in all aspects of life and ministry.
3. Leaders must be characterised by humility. Humility is an important prerequisite for a truly empowering leadership. The incarnated Christ provides a classic example of this.<sup>64</sup>
4. Church leadership must be characterised by a positive attitude towards suffering (2 Cor 4:1-18). This point cannot be emphasised enough. Suffering provides a check against triumphalism, and minimises power-abusive leadership.<sup>65</sup>
5. Leaders must be accountable to other leaders, and to their flocks. Accountability characterises power-giving leadership.<sup>66</sup> Leaders cannot be leaders without followers. They are also accountable to their peers. Therefore, true leadership is

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<sup>64</sup> Phil 2:5-11.

<sup>65</sup> Craig Van Gelder states: "They [Christians leaders] are called to a lifestyle of suffering service that is willing to let the power of powerlessness unmask the principalities and powers that have already been defeated through Christ's death and resurrection (Col 2:15)", Craig Van Gelder, "Defining the Issues Related to Power and Authority in Religious Leadership", in *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6-2 (2007)

<sup>66</sup> Larry W. Spielman, "David's Abuse of Power", in *ATLAS XIX-3* (1999), p. 257.

possible only when accountability is transacted between leaders and leaders, and leaders their followers.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored the issue of power abuse in local churches. Leadership power abuse in local churches may not be reported, but the writer believes that it is more pervasive than assumed. Perhaps this problem is contributing significantly to the ineffectiveness of local churches in Bougainville. It is vital, therefore, for local churches to be aware of the problem, and to deal with it accordingly. Leadership power abuse cannot be tolerated in the church, since the Lord of the church Himself provides the power-giving model to be followed.

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