

CAUGHT IN THE POWER TRAP:

MY STRUGGLE WITH POWER

BY DAN SCHAEFFER



My wife and I had only been married about a year when it happened. We had always enjoyed a wonderful relationship with each other, but like every couple, stress can build tension. We were angry with each other over something that escapes me now. Sensing a threat to my authority, I fairly exploded in anger with a volume I had never approached before. I am loath to admit it, but I felt a perverse pleasure in releasing my “power.” There was only going to be one head of this house, by golly, and it was going to be me. Then I stomped out of the room.

Later, when we had both calmed down, we sat down and apologized to each other. But then she said something that I will never forget. I remember it as if it were yesterday. “You know, Dan, you scared me. I didn’t know what you were going to do.” I was absolutely crushed. I felt about two inches tall. I asked her forgiveness for that, and I never, ever, did that again.

My dear wife, whom I had promised before God and others to love,

honor and protect, had been frightened by her protector. Conflict in any relationship is inevitable, but I had clearly abused my authority.

Use and Abuse of Authority

Authority. Power. I wasn’t used to having it, and I abused it. Unfortunately, while I stopped abusing my power with my wife, I have abused it with others, and for the very same reason. I was unprepared for this authority I received and had little or no instruction on its true nature.

In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus was speaking to his disciples when he said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28, NASB).

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I had done to Annette exactly what Jesus had said not to do—I lorded my authority over her. The reason is that I hadn’t really thought about this issue of power much, because quite honestly, positions of power kind of sneak up on us sometimes.

It seems almost simplistic to say that all power belongs to God. David reminds us in Psalm 62:11 (NASB) “Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God.” Paul says in Romans 11:36 (NASB) that “from him and through him and to him are all things.” All power originates in God, and belongs to him. But few of us have thought through the implications of this biblical truth. If all power is given by God, then any position of power or authority I find myself in comes from him.

The problem is that we often find ourselves receiving power unexpectedly. We may marry into a position of authority, or become promoted into a position of authority over someone at work. We receive authority when we have children, or we are elected to a position within the church. One day we may be elected head of the PTA, or Elks, or

Rotary or some other group or club. But rarely does anyone ever tell us when this happens, “OK, here is the proper attitude and manner in which you should approach the power you are about to receive.”

Since we aren’t always consciously aware that God has given us this position of power, it is easy to treat it as merely a human opportunity that we can handle with our own resources and methods. Furthermore, we frequently get into these positions of authority before we’ve had time to think through what it means.

How did Dad treat Mom? How did Mom treat Dad? How did Mom and Dad raise us kids? How have I seen power used in the office? The way we have seen authority modeled is how we frequently respond to authority when it is given to us. Finding ourself thrust into power unexpectedly, we react instinctively. Yet, if God entrusts us with power, he has a purpose behind it.

Enjoying Power

I had never really thought of myself as someone who enjoyed power. But the more I allowed myself to consider it, the clearer it became that I was guilty of enjoying the perks and resisting the service.

Who retains control over the remote control every night? I do! Who insists upon the *seat of honor* at the dinner table every night? Yours truly. Who sits on the best part of the couch that reclines and has the best view of the tube? You guessed it.

Several years ago I resigned from my pastorate of 13 years and found myself one Sunday in an uncomfortable position. I had not yet moved out of the area, so I continued attending the same church. However, I wasn’t pastor anymore, and while I thought I would be fine with that, certain experiences showed me that giving up the perks of power wasn’t going to be easy.

While sitting in the back of the church, a man I had disciplined for years came up to me with an offering bag and asked if I’d help to

take the offering. I was surprised—and strangely disturbed—because I found I didn’t want to do it. This was an external signal that my power, and its perks, had come to an end. I had always been too busy doing important things to take the offering. Now I wasn’t doing important things anymore—or was I? There was probably nothing healthier for myself or the church than to see former “Pastor Dan” taking the offering. There was a sense of grief over losing something I valued, but upon reflection I was forced to admit that I had the wrong view of power.

God has told us how he wants us to use our power. For example, as a husband I needed to focus more clearly on Ephesians 5:23. “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church...” I had been told all my life, in church and outside, that the man was the head of the home. When I read that verse in Ephesians, it simply confirmed what I had always been told.

The problem is that I had missed the qualifier. I am the head of my wife the way Christ is the head of the church. That means I must look at the sacrificial nature of Christ’s work for his church to understand my headship. Jesus reminded us that he did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28 NASB). God never asked me to make up my own job description; he gave it to me.

The Power to Save

I am to lead my wife with self sacrifice, selflessness, compassion, tremendous patience and understanding. That is how I am to use the power God has entrusted to me in my marriage, but also with my children and at the office. In reality, what I have been given is the power to serve others on God’s behalf.

That means that I need to give up the remote and my favorite spot on the couch to my wife or children far more often. It means I still need to be respon-

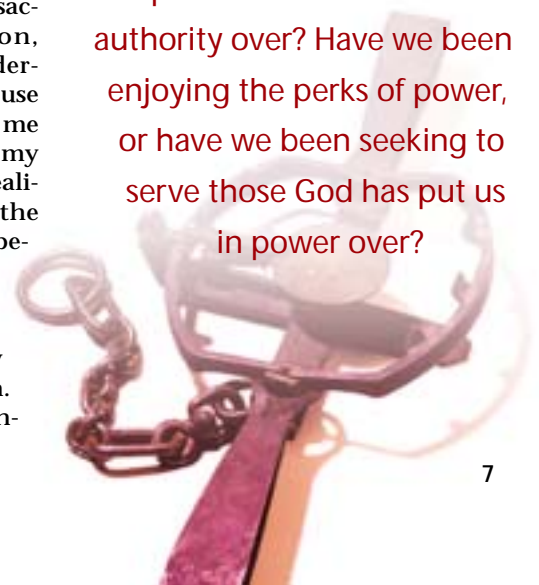
sible for leading, caring for and providing for my family, but I don’t always get to pick the restaurant we will go to, or the kind of car we will buy. It means when everyone else in the family wants to have company over, and I’m tired, I acquiesce.

A number of years ago our church moved into its first real offices. When we were preparing to buy new computers, both my associate pastor and I coveted laptops. When the budget was examined, however, we discovered that we could not afford two laptops. As senior pastor, I could have pulled rank (and I did want a laptop) and chosen the laptop for myself. But my associate, due to the nature of his job, really did need a laptop more than I did. I told the board to give it to him, and I got the boring desktop. True servant leadership seeks the best for those you lead, not yourself. Power is entrusted to us for service.

I am not a free agent in regard to the power I have been given, free to decide how to use the power I wield. When I exercise authority over my children, my wife, my employees, my neighbors, in any way whatsoever, I am doing so as God’s agent.

In that moment I am an extension of God’s

We need to ask ourselves some probing questions. How have we been using our power? Who are we in authority over? Have we been enjoying the perks of power, or have we been seeking to serve those God has put us in power over?



authority. Of course that leads me to a frightening dilemma. I know from personal experience that my natural impulses will lead to abuse. It is small wonder that many people have had bad experiences in Christian homes where power was wielded arbitrarily.

Unfortunately, our faith will not instantly produce in us an ability to lead spiritually as Christ would have us. Our lives are constantly in transformation. One moment sin is influencing our decisions, the next we allow Christ to influence them. Such continual fluctuations in our spirituality lead to wildly fluctuating approaches and abuses in power or authority.

It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." I fail this test continually. This reminds me to guard against depending on my natural impulses when it comes to power.

Two Abuses of Power

Some people have short fuses naturally. They overreact to everything, squashing ants with steamrollers. Their abuse of power is easy to identify. Harsh words, yelling, intimidation or threats are used to gain the control we desire. Being in control has been mistaken for Christlike sacrificial leadership.

But while overreacting in anger is obvious, the other abuse is to under react. Some of us are by personality calm, quiet, and not at all given to manipulation or coercion. Controlling others is not a goal or aspiration. As a result we can feel we are truly representing Christ because we don't obviously abuse our power.

Unfortunately, that patient calmness is often more a result of our personality than a fruit of the Spirit. Instead of reacting with anger when our power is ques-

tioned or threatened, we respond with passivity. While that may make us less volatile, it doesn't make us more Christlike. In my years of pastoral counseling I have spoken to many wives who were frustrated at their husband's lack of leadership.

We may simply be seeking to avoid conflict, hoping to abdicate all the difficult decisions for our spouse, bosses or someone else to make. We are afraid to accept the responsibility God has entrusted us with because to lead is to take a chance—to risk failure and trust God to give us wisdom, guidance and counsel is difficult. In any position of power there is a potential of making the wrong decision. It can be tempting to retreat into indecision.

If a police officer uses his (or her) authority to extort money from someone, that's abuse. But if a crime is being committed, and the police officer refuses to intervene, he is equally abusing his authority.

Philippians 2:5-8 reminds us that Christ was willing to forego his position of glory and honor and "empty himself." We are reminded to have the same attitude in ourselves. Our obsession is frequently power; his was love.

We need to to ask ourselves some probing questions. How have we been using our power? Who are we in authority over? Have we been enjoying the perks of power, or have we been seeking to serve those God has put us in power over? Are we acting as free agents in our positions of power, or as God's agents? Are we abdicating our authority by refusing to make a decision that needs to be made? □

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I had never really thought of myself as someone who enjoyed power. But the more I allowed myself to consider it, the clearer it became that I was guilty of enjoying the perks and resisting the service.



From the vantage point of our free Western society, it's hard to believe that in some countries people still live in slavery and oppression. Yet an even greater number—perhaps the majority of the world's population—live under some form of religious oppression. Incredibly, many of these are Christians who live under the mistaken belief that their observance of unbiblical rules, regulations and rituals will somehow make God more pleased with them. Plain Truth Ministries exists to bring the freedom of God's grace to these captives.

Plain Truth Ministries invites you to join with us on *March 12th, 2006* in a day of prayer for the captives—for all those who are in the bonds of religious oppression and legalism.

What can you do? Join with Christian friends for a time of prayer. Share a cup of coffee or tea with a friend, and pray for someone you know who is a slave to religious legalism. If you're in a small group, make it a point to meet on that day, and pray for religious captives. Tell your pastor. Ask him to support this day of prayer for the captives. Email your friends and let them know.

In the next issue of *Plain Truth*, we'll give more details about how you can participate in and promote *Day of Prayer for the Captives*.