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Called To Power

Errol N. McLean

Andrews University, mcleane@andrews.edu

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Y
ears ago, a union president proudly informed me that he had just been promoted to a “higher position” at the division. I was taken aback by this statement of promotion from one whom I considered a humble and godly leader. Immediately I sensed the insidious and corrupting nature of position and power and how easily one can be enticed to seek a higher pedestal rather than God’s will.

Not that we do not have many spiritual and selfless leaders at all levels in the church. Ellen White speaks of such persons as “men and women who will not be bought or sold . . . whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole.” These men and women are convicted about their call to a ministry of service at the most basic levels in the church. These are administrators and pastors in remote places, serving with heartfelt conviction that ministry is a calling to lift up Christ and not self. These are also students in our colleges and seminaries who are not fascinated by the trappings of power but are passionate about self-sacrificing service in the most rudimentary positions and isolated places.

While we are fortunate to have such men and women who serve the church with devotion and humility, it is observable that some misuse the power that is inherent in their position to exalt self and not Christ. The purpose of this article is to generate a thoughtful dialogue about how easily power can be misused in the church, with the hope that this recognition will call us back from the edge of the abyss to once again embrace ethical, biblical leadership.

Our fervent hope should ever be that all pastors and leaders accept God’s call to ministry with hearts aflame, determined to serve wherever God places us, and work with humility, compassion, and rejection of pride in any form. We have all too often forgotten that we are called to a ministry of self-sacrificing service; not one of self-promotion, professional pride, and pretension. The call to pastoral ministry is identified as “not from human origin but of divine instigation.” This uniqueness of ministry is due to its divine appointment and means that it is more than a profession; it is a calling.

I still recall the sense of passion and wonderment at my own initial call to pastoral ministry. I experienced an intense joy at my appointment to full-time ministry. The reasons for my joy were twofold: first, God had called and prepared me for ministry; second, God had made me realize that the power to transform lives and save souls is His—and never mine. I recall my sense of bashful amazement that mature adults would listen to me and choose to be spiritually influenced by my service and ministry. The call of Saul (1 Sam. 10:20–27) reveals how a divine empowerment to lead often begins with a great sense of awe and personal unworthiness but can quickly deteriorate into a debilitating attitude of entitlement and abuse of power.

Lessons from Saul

The experience of Saul, Israel’s first king, provides an instructive parallel to the dangers faced by those of us called by God and entrusted by Him with power to lead. Wiest and Smith state that when a pastor is ordained, that act of ordination by the church bestows on the clergyperson a special responsibility and a sacred role within the community of faith. If that sacred responsibility is treated and used as though it were the clergy’s personal possession, the pastor is indulging in an abuse of power. Raymond Edwards observes that the acquisition and exercising of power in religious ministry is not only dynamic and delicate but also potentially dangerous. It is obvious that no one called to ministry is immune to the risk of the abuse of power. That risk is inherent in leadership positions and, therefore, requires careful monitoring.

Initial humility

The humility involved in Saul’s initial response to the divine call reflects two factors identifiable in the response of most individuals to their initial call to pastoral ministry. First, the call is to a divine task—something impossible to fulfill with human ability alone. Second, the call is from among his or her peers. This calling involves a divine empowerment to influence and provide spiritual leadership for those from among whom he or she is called. These two factors can produce a sense of personal unworthiness as the individual seeks for divine
empowerment. Notice Saul’s first reaction when he was chosen by God through the prophet Samuel. Saul felt so unworthy for this divine task that he left his peers and hid himself. At Samuel’s command, Saul was brought to stand before the prophet to hear his calling. One moment Saul was just one among his friends, and the next moment, people were hailing him, “God save the king.”

Saul responded to this sudden transition and empowerment with quiet dignity. He chose not to be offended by the animosity of those who rejected him. A certain sense of timidity and naïveté marked his responses. It was as if power and privilege had been too suddenly thrust on him. Awkward and uncertain, he shied away from embracing the power, almost as if he sensed its conceited nature. Though he was given a position of power, he had not yet grasped the power of the position. His humility and hesitant embrace of power at his calling is the complete opposite of the arrogance, pride, and abuse that he showed a few years into his leadership. If Saul’s response to the initial call to kingship showed a humble, God-dependent mind, his later style of leadership showed the corporate mind-set into which a proud and arrogant Saul fell.

The corporate mind-set

We have some pastors today who have a heartfelt acceptance that true ministry is about providing spiritual leadership, service, and influence to bring people into a saving relationship with Christ. There are others, unfortunately, who see ministry as an accumulation of power and privilege, based on the continuous attaining of “higher” positions within the church organization. We are also painfully aware of the unhealthy use of influence and power that occurs at all levels of the church during the election of leaders. The model displayed is that successful ministry is being attached to large churches, administrative offices, and leadership positions in the hierarchy of the church. This approach to ministry results in abuse of power and display of pride in positions. Such postures are not representative of Christ’s model of servant leadership but, rather, examples of a corporate mind-set.

Richard Exley notes that when the negative influence of power is allowed to creep into the ministry, ministry loses its intended purpose of saving and serving souls. This potential to abuse power is present in everyone. It is not necessarily true humility that keeps the abuse of power in check but rather a lack of opportunity to exercise power. Indeed we all search for power, and we are all vulnerable to misusing power, even when that power is given by God to serve His cause and His people.

Review the kingship of Saul again, and note the power dynamics at play in his style of leadership. Such a review of these dynamics gives us three kinds of Saul: the hesitant and naïve Saul...
(1 Sam. 10:21–27); the confident, God-empowered Saul (1 Sam. 11:6–15); and the despotic, self-reliant, power-hungry and power-abusing Saul (1 Sam. 13:7–31:13). With which Saul do I most identify?

A brief look at a couple of definitions for power will create an understanding of the corrosive nature of power and its impact on ministry. Power is described as

- great or marked ability to do or act; strength; might; force and
- possession of control, authority, or influence over others.

Both definitions provide a general context for understanding what power looks like in the church.

Secular power positions are often accompanied by attractive financial compensations, with privileges and perks. Power positions in the church are, however, not attached to financial compensations that are particularly higher than what others in ministry receive. The perceived reward is, therefore, not pay, but positions of control, command, and authority. The church has created its own currency of value, which is pride of ascendant positions in a pecking order. This involves esteem, influence, and recognition of being “first among equals.”

Raymond Edwards observes that some churches support power positions with certain physical structures and trappings to consolidate and signal the power of the position. These perks and benefits are often disguised as essentials for effectively delivering ministry. At the level of the local church these can be reserved parking spaces, private toilet facilities, personal telephone lines, credit card facility, and personal deacon escorts. These trappings can be rationalized as simple conveniences to facilitate ministry, but in effect they are exclusive privileges that consolidate and signal the power, priority, and primacy of power positions.

### Power and positions

Power positions in the church are associated with control over resources as well as over the welfare of one’s peers. The early King Saul reveals a leader who was not self-serving in his control over resources and not vindictive concerning the welfare of his peers who had rejected him. It is this Saul that demonstrates the potential God identified when He initially called this future king from among his peers (1 Sam. 10:20–22; 11).

Unlike this early Saul, too many church administrators act like the later Saul—creating and maintaining positions of power rather than acting to enhance their quality of service in ministry. The church today is threatened by the despiritualizing process, not dissimilar to the later Saul, caused by our new valued currency of pride and position in ascendancy over one’s peers. Power positions are sought and retained not so much for service but for influence, recognition, and esteem. The focus is on personal ambitions rather than on service and mission. This model results in cynicism, vindictive behaviors, and a failure to view the church as the spiritual body of Christ.

Exley notes that personal ambition in a pastor can be justified as a vision for the kingdom, a divine call, or the following of God’s will. This mixing of power and pride is, however, combustible. The danger lies in conflating our personal egos with the illusion that we are enabled by divine empowerment to use our influence for self-centered purposes in the name of God’s cause.

The more we value the new currency we have created, the less we value the priesthood of all believers and the pastoral calling of service to a congregation. The call to “ministry” becomes a call to seek hierarchical power positions instead of a call to pastoral service. Pastors, then, can simply become pawns or shrewd professionals in the business of gaining these power positions and awaiting their turn to do so.

This is not the biblical servant leadership model of Christ. The church
will lose its appeal to a cynical generation because her structures, values, and culture reflect those of the world. When the world no longer views the church as morally and ethically different, those who are looking for examples of Christlikeness are disillusioned by this new norm.

**Power through humility**

A brief examination of the confident, God-empowered Saul (1 Sam. 11:6–15) can help us avoid these pitfalls of the abuse of power. When Saul, as a new king, defeated the Ammonites in his first battle, he faced the temptation to be vindictive to his own people who had not initially supported him. His response was not self-serving but instead a genuine reflection of humility for what God had done (1 Sam. 11:13).

Saul clearly understood his own frailty and gave credit to God, who brought about the victory. He recognized that power and position were not to be grasped for self-advancement but to be placed in service to God. In 1 Samuel 11:13–15 we see Saul rejecting the temptation to be vindictive. This Christlike example is then followed by Samuel’s “call to the people” to renew the kingdom. All Israel “rejoiced greatly” and accepted Saul “as king before the Lord.”

Such utility of power to expand God’s kingdom and preserve the unity of God’s people is the biblical model of empowered ministry. When we embrace such humility in service, we discover the antidote for the corrosive effects of the abuse of power in ministry. Did not Jesus say: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him 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” (Matt. 20:25–28, NKJV; cf. also Phil. 2:5–9).

It is clear that the call of Jesus is a call to positions of service and not to positions of power. The call to Christlikeness in ministry is not to selfish advancement but to selfless, God-empowered service of humility.

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2. Seventh-day Adventist Minister’s Handbook (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, 2009), 15.