

WHAT IS POWER?

BY ROGER PREECE, AN EXTRACT FROM UNDERSTANDING AND USING POWER (GROVE BOOKS)

All of us use power and have it used on us. But what is power? Should Christians in leadership fear power as a corruptor of their souls, or recognise the dangers and use power carefully and wisely for a greater purpose?

DEFINITIONS OF POWER

Power is all around us but cannot be seen. We move around our planet surrounded by electromagnetic waves, a form of power transmitting information. We are rarely far from an electricity plug or gas connection. These forms of power can be experienced physically. But what about the power of a human mind to influence outcomes? This is the power considered in this article: the power to make things happen in human society or to resist and prevent change. It is an invisible power that all of us use in different ways.

One challenge for Christian leaders is that there is often a denial of power in the way Christians lead. Because of the fear of the corrupting influence power has, it is a taboo subject; no Christian leader wishes to admit they are powerful. However, experience would suggest that many leaders, even in the Christian world, are highly motivated by power, even though they might not admit it.

We need to have an honest appraisal of our own access to power, our use of power and also the motivations of our heart. Power in ministry can so easily be abused.



THE REALITY OF POWER

What are the different types of power that we might experience?

Positional: Power derived from place in hierarchy

Vicar, bishop, parish administrator are all examples of roles that have a position with a derived sense of power based on history, tradition, training and means of appointment.

Relational: Power from trusted connections to others

There are people who are immensely powerful – because of who they know they can pick up the phone and make things happen. They can send an email and get important information quickly because they have strong and committed relationships. From a positive perspective, if they are supportive of an initiative they can rally people behind it; if they are negative they can build factions to oppose change.

Resource: Power from access to resources

Those who have money can make things happen if they choose. Most strategies in ministry have a financial cost, and individuals who have access to significant resources can facilitate or constrain ministry. Donors can also exert an ongoing influence over their legacies. I have sometimes heard, 'We cannot change x – it was paid for by y in memory of z.' Ownership or caretaking of buildings is another form of power. Access can be given or denied by the controller of the resource.

Physical: Use of physical force

A child about to run into a road without looking can be physically restrained by someone strong enough. Some youth ministries need to have bouncers around in case of trouble. This is physical power.

Personality: Attractiveness in ways of presenting oneself that draws others to follow

This is a hard power to quantify. There are some people whom, on first meeting, we like and want to please. This gives them a form of power they can use to get things to happen. Self-help literature offers plenty of books that promise the keys to being an attractive personality. Although certain things can be influenced by presentation, the strongest personality power in the long term comes from a good character.

Knowledge: Power related to key knowledge that affects an area

Francis Bacon stated that 'knowledge is power.' There are many examples of this in church life. A Bible study member who states what the Greek actually says is hard to argue with; the lawyer who states that a particular action would be illegal protects a leader from a law suit; an architect who uses their skill and wisdom to create a better design for a church extension, all are using their knowledge in respect of influencing outcomes.

Experiential: Power related to supposed previous experiences and success or failures

This can be used negatively towards someone offering a new idea to an organisation: 'We tried this in 1983 and it didn't work then and certainly will not work now.' It can also be used positively to bring about change related to previous experiences of success in the past that need to be retried.

Spiritual: Power derived from actual or assumed spiritual experience

On the positive side, there are men and women we encounter who are genuinely godly. They are humble and prayerful people who cultivate a sense of listening to God. They might possess prophetic gifts and have a sense of how God is working in a particular setting. They might be people with few words, yet their words are usually taken very seriously when they have an opinion to offer. They exert, without realising it, a genuine spiritual power.

Celebrity: Power of a reputation that gives people authority, access to resources and an attentive audience

It is not just the talent show world of pseudo-reality TV that creates celebrities. The Christian world is also influenced by celebrity culture. The Christian conference circuit competes to get the top name speakers that will attract the crowds. Music and book publishers try to publicise the latest author and song-writer who will generate the most sales.

IN CONCLUSION

All these types of power can exist in church life. We must not be naïve. They can be used for good and bad, and they can be used in a God honouring way or a self-beneficial way. We need to choose wisely.

An amended extract from the Grove booklet, Understanding and Using Power, by Roger Preece.

For a fuller exploration of this subject click [here](#) to order your copy from the CPAS online bookshop.

**FOR REFLECTION**

- Which types of power do you recognise being used in your own church?
- Which types of power do you think you use as a leader?
- How can you ensure you use power in the right way for the right purposes?