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Answering Your Question: Leadership and Power

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Answering Your Question: Leadership and Power

Abstract

"Rather, an office is about the particular ways in which one kind of creature can serve within creation in such a way that a necessary task is achieved."

Posting about servant leadership in the church from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-leadership-and-power/>

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Answering Your Question—Leadership and Power

 inallthings.org/answering-your-question-leadership-and-power/

Liz Moss Neal DeRoo

At in all things, we love to receive questions from our readers. We want to know what you are thinking about. We want to know what is wrestling around in your brain as you read the news, interact with us, and face what life brings you day in and day out. What you think is significant and we desire to have conversations with our readers.

Recently a reader asked this question.

With the meltdown of the Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill empire, and the common belief that what Driscoll and Mars Hill stand for is “Reformed”, can you address the topic of power, control and leadership and what that should look like from your understanding of a Reformed perspective? Too often manipulation and bullying leads the way and which is so far from Jesus’ example of servant leadership, which Christians like to talk about. How can churches and Christian leaders be better at actually enacting servant leadership rather than hierarchical, top-down leadership? It seems that often servant leadership is talked about a lot, which makes people think it is being done, when it really isn’t.

—Kelly

It seems like more often we read in the news or hear from others the abuse of power passed down from those who have been given much responsibility. With the uproar of the Rice and Peterson controversy in the NFL, the topics of power and abuse have been quite apparent most recently. But, as your question reminds us, the church should not be too naive to believe the abuse of power only happens outside of the church doors.

The Reformed tradition gives us something distinctive in discussing the uses of power in its notion of “office.” An office is a unique authority, based upon a unique set of abilities, exercised to achieve certain tasks that are necessary within the context of creation. Creation is woven together by different kinds of things and the different ways of relating to each other that those things can have (see the [Everything is Related](#) post). An ‘office’ is the place where those different ways of relating intersect with particular kinds of creatures in particular ways: an educational setting, for example, requires people who need to learn something and people who can communicate what needs to be learned; hence, you have the offices of ‘student’ and ‘teacher,’ respectively.

Because it is based on the ways that certain creatures relate to each other, an office necessarily has limited scope and authority: it only pertains to those particular creatures, and even then only when they are relating in those particular ways for those particular reasons. A teacher is only a teacher relative to her students, and even then is so only within the confines of the school day. That is, a teacher has a certain kind of authority vis-à-vis her students, but only in the context of school—she does not have that authority when she encounters her students in the grocery store or at the park.

An office, therefore, is not the same as exercising power over someone else (which is what most people

seem to mean by ‘leadership’ nowadays: the ability to get people to do something, usually something you want them to do). Rather, an office is about the particular ways in which one kind of creature can serve within creation in such a way that a necessary task is achieved. This service makes no sense if we forget that offices always must occur alongside other offices. The call of the office, then, is to exercise authority in the way appropriate to that office—and only to that office. The office of student is no less important than the office of teacher. Both are necessary if a school is going to flourish as a place of education, but only if the student serves the teacher by fulfilling his duties as a student, and the teacher serves the student by fulfilling her duties as a teacher.

Historically speaking, the Reformed tradition has stated that there are three distinct offices within the church: elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament.¹ Elders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of God’s people. Deacons serve by showing mercy to the church and to all people. The office of minister of Word and sacrament, more commonly known as the pastor, serves by preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments.²

As distinct offices within the context of church, the offices of elder, deacon and pastor cannot serve alone. The minister of Word and sacrament does not serve without the elder or without the deacon. The elder does not serve without the deacon or without the minister. And, the deacon does not serve without the elder or the minister. These three offices cannot be separated. Together they enable the whole mission of the church, and if one of these offices is not present, the church cannot fulfill its mission.³ Together elder, deacon, and minister of Word and Sacrament serve Christ, serve one another, and serve God’s people. This is a practice of genuine service: All offices serving God by serving each other.

In many contemporary churches, the idea and role of office bearers and the service of the elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament seems to have been skewed. Rather than understanding the equal roles of the three offices, too often the church has placed the offices in a hierarchical, top-down form of leadership. The pastor becomes the Chief Executive Officer of the church. The elder serves under the pastor. The deacons follow in order. The congregation members are the stakeholders. All the uses of authority and power necessary for the church to function properly are, ultimately, given to the pastor.

This is not the Reformed perspective—and it is potentially dangerous. This model of ‘church leadership’ inevitably leads to crises like we saw in the dismantling of the leadership at Mars Hill. The problem with having one person ultimately responsible for everything the church is supposed to do is that it is simply too much for one person to do. As a result, what tends to happen is either that the life of the church suffers because insufficient attention is paid to some of its essential functions (preaching the word, guiding the people’s spiritual well-being, serving and caring for those in need), or a person is tasked with doing more than any person could ever actually do. In the latter case, future downfall or controversy seems inevitable. No person can be given that much power, control or authority and be expected to carry it well. Failure to acknowledge our limitations—in part by failing to acknowledge the distinct ‘offices’—inevitably leads to problems.

The notion of office is meant as both a call for service and an acknowledgment of the necessity of our own limitations. No creature can do everything. And no office-bearer should be asked to.

Footnotes

1. In some Reformed traditions, the office of “professor of theology” is considered a fourth church

office. ↩

2. "Form for Ordination of Elder and Deacon" (1982) and "Form for Ordination and Installation of Minister of Word and Sacrament" (1986), Christian Reformed Church in North America. ↩
3. This is just to say that the authority inherent in the office must be exercised, in the context of the church, to fulfill the tasks and duties inherent to that office. This can be done without someone claiming the title of 'elder' or 'deacon'. In a church that has no pastor, someone must still preach the Word and administer the sacraments if the church is going to continue to be a church. Whoever does so is occupying the office of pastor, though only for the brief time they are utilizing the authority inherent to that office. ↩