

not so with you

Chris Green considers power and the local church

'Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.'
(Matthew 20:25-26)





Chris Green is vicar of St James, Muswell Hill in North London. He is the author of several books, including *The Gift: How Your Leadership Can Serve Your Church* (IVP, 2021), *The Church in The Bible Speaks Today* series (IVP, 2013), and *'When your first love is loving to be first'*, in *Not So Among You*, eds. Mark Meynell and Mark Stirling (Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

I was lying in my hospital bed, recovering from some pretty major surgery. All the team had been fantastic, caring for me through some hairy moments.

Then one day a friend from church dropped by. 'Hi, Chris! 'Hi Pete!' And we were off, chatting and laughing. Except he wasn't just Pete. In that hospital he was a very senior consultant, highly respected. As he left, cheerily waving, a little bit of his magic rubbed off on me. I wasn't just friends with him, I was his good, first name terms, friend. And suddenly it was as though my bed grew three inches in height. I'd been well looked after before, but now it was as though I was inside a charmed circle. Inside the jokes. Inside the group where favours were done.

Power. Pete had it, and he shared it with me. Perhaps you've seen something similar.

Alternatively, I think of Toby in a small church in the Scottish borders. He dared to run an all-age service to attract the families. After the first one, a local landowner glared at him at the door afterwards. 'Well, padre, we won't be having any more of those, will we.' It wasn't a question.

Let's have a think about power, first along some spectrums, examining their results, and seeing how they interact. At some stage you might be asked to join your church's leadership, and so we'll think about some of those particular dynamics.

All the way through, remember that Jesus insisted, as he looked at the cultural norms around his disciples, 'Not so with you.' He doesn't say, 'don't lead'. He says, 'don't lead like them'.

1. power exists on a series of spectrums

Power isn't a single or simple thing, so let's break it into six pairs, each on a spectrum. This isn't a complete list, so add more as they occur to you.

the formal/informal spectrum

Formal power boils down to, 'from my position

I have *been given* the right/authority/duty to tell you what to do'. Informal power is much less obvious, and it boils down to 'from my life I have earned the right/authority/duty/experience to tell you what to do'.

I know a church which is deeply committed to being governed by their eldership. They are all carefully vetted, theologically alert, respected, and listened to. It's a plurality of elders. That's what it says on the church governance papers.

Except I know that when the pastor enters the meeting, the elders all stand. He is 'just' one of them, accountable and equal. As an employee of the church, they could sack him. But they stand up. Nothing in the formal governance papers would lead you to expect that, but informally it's obvious. Who would vote against anything he proposes?

the visible/hidden spectrum

According to pastors' lore, the easiest way to discover who thinks they have power in church is not to look at the website (visible) but to change the locks. You'll find out who has keys, and who thinks they have a right to keys. That power is hidden deep in pockets and purses, but from a pastor's perspective, it is very useful to bring it out.

Sometimes, the hiddenness of the power is in its design. In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear tells the story of a hospital where proper communication had broken, and many worked in fear. Nurses had a secret code on the ward whiteboard. A doctor's name in green meant a good doctor and one you could talk to. The name in black, meant tread carefully and never get close to questioning their opinion. Reds would bite your head off and you'd be fired.²

That whiteboard was an expression of hidden power – the power of the doctors, and the power of the nurses, too.

the earned/inherited spectrum

Not long after I arrived at our current church,

a long-time member died, and I conducted the funeral. Despite the fact there were other clergy on the team it was thought proper that I took the service. I was the vicar. I *inherited* that power/authority with the role.

Now, when I take such services, the church knows I am doing it for my spiritual family. I have a lump in the throat, and a real hug for the bereaved, and they want me there. It's no longer 'proper' – it's a privilege. And I have *earned* the privilege.

the monitored/unmonitored spectrum

This spectrum has seen most attention recently, because of what's happened at the 'unmonitored' end. Churches have seen physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, so are now rigorously patrolled by safeguarding processes, to minimise risks. Safe ratios in the kids' ministry, domestic abuse training for those who serve with seniors – they all move ministry into a much more 'monitored' place, where power can rightly be watched.

And I imagine if you talk to medics who have been in post for a few decades, they will tell you of how things have changed since Harold Shipman.³

the high-control/low-control spectrum

When I walk our dog on the lead, I have high control. If I take her off it, I've exercised the power of giving freedom. Actually, I never do that in public because we've never been able to train her not to run up to total strangers and pester them. So, if I did that, I'd have abused my power to permit anarchy. Not low-control, but no-control. We'll come back to this one.

the personal/positional spectrum

Greg became the vicar of a church on the outskirts of Manchester. It was a lively church, but he became aware he wasn't able to introduce anything new. No change happened. At all.

He finally found the reason. His predecessor had been in post a long time, and then retired in the area. Whenever the church council was due to meet, his predecessor convened an informal gathering of the council at his home, and went

through the agenda, telling them what to say and how to vote.

Greg may have had *positional* authority, but his predecessor had personal authority, which trumped it. At least the problem was clarified, and Greg knew he had to tackle it.

2. each spectrum can grow either good fruit or poison at any point

Now let's take it to a more complicated level, because no spectrum is right or wrong itself. They're descriptive categories, not moral ones. If we look at one, we can see both fruit and poison lying all around, at both ends.

Let's revisit that *high-control/low-control* spectrum. This is a major tension for Christians in the West. Culturally we distrust high-control patterns, because they've led to totalitarian states, and we strongly prefer low-control patterns, because they value liberty, individualism, and self-expression. But Christianly, we live under the highest of control patterns, with a Lord who owns us, has the absolute right to tell us what to do, what is right and wrong, and who expects us to use self-control to follow him (see Titus 2).

The good fruit of *high-control* systems is that they run disciplined systems with efficient and highly predictable results. Take my surgery: I've researched the careful choreography of what happened during eight hours in theatre, the detailed movement of hands, the placement of parts. It's fascinating, because it is such a practiced ballet.

But, as we've said, the poison of *high-control* systems is tyranny. James Clear goes further in that story of the hospital with the whiteboard. It took the death of a patient after brain surgery, where the surgeon had operated on the wrong side of the brain because no-one dared to challenge him, before the issue was settled. Wouldn't you describe his power as a tyranny?

Now, as we've said, move to the other end of the spectrum and you'll find the good fruit growing from *low-control* systems. Freedom, autonomy, self-expression and creativity are all found here, and

they taste delicious. So, what's the poison? Anarchy, with no control over abuse. My dog, off her lead.

And here's a twist for church leaders like me: anarchy is not just the poison growing in the absence of authority – it grows when those who do have authority don't use it. The preacher who remains silent. The pastor who refuses to rebuke. The counsellor who only affirms and never calls to repentance. The non-use of good power is also a tyranny.

3. the spectrums interact

Let's play one of those flipchart exercises where you draw four squares, and fill them with possibilities. Two of our spectrums will interact: horizontally we'll put the *formal/informal* spectrum, and vertically the *personal/positional* spectrum.

Top left, both personal and formal, is my visitor Pete, the consultant. Someone would have to be occupying his role for the department to work, but Pete was the one who passed the exams, wrote the papers, to get there. And because it's him, that position of power will be exercised differently to anyone else, on a daily basis.

Bottom left, positional and formal, is your line manager. By design, little of her personality will come into this relationship, but if you've ever experienced an annual appraisal, you'll know that the person conducting it has great power.

Bottom right, positional but more informal, is where you'll find respectful but free discussion. With my surgery there were many meetings of a multi-disciplinary team: surgeons, oncologists, pharmacists, physios, nurses, all needed and contributing. Whichever one had the chair, everyone was there because no-one knew everything, and everyone knew something that no-one else was trained to see.

And top right, personal and informal, is where you find the indefinable things we call 'charisma',

'natural authority', 'born leader'. Research and publishing in this area is vast.

It's the area I'd least expect to find in a hospital (I might be wrong!), but it's what churches the world over think they want from their pastor. For them, the fruit growing in this garden is spiritual manna. But the poison comes from the pit of hell.

4. church

At some point, as a mature, articulate Christian, you might be invited to step into leadership in church. Maybe on the board, or the church council. Those are positions of authority and power, and the first thing that you need to remember is that everything we have seen above is true in church as well. Richard Hooker, an Anglican theologian, writing four hundred years ago, said 'the church is a society both natural and supernatural', meaning that even while we pray, worship, call on the Holy Spirit, the normal spectrums of human behaviour still apply, with their fruit and poison.

So, step one, don't be shocked by that. In fact, if you read your Bible, you won't be. Here's a quick Bible study for you. Take the little letter of 3 John, and without consulting any commentaries, try to reconstruct the twisted power dynamics that led to John writing. Make a cast list, and work out who has done what. It's eye opening, and sharply relevant.

Every Christian still sins and struggles, and we bite and devour each other in church.⁴ But step two, don't become cynical. This is church, where prayer works, the gospel is true, Jesus actively reigns, the Holy Spirit fills us with love and equips us to serve, and Satan has been defeated and will soon lie crushed at our feet.⁵

In some ways, church will always be a context where abuse of power happens, because it is where Satan has most to gain. He loves it when we lead like the Gentiles. And he hates it when we serve like our Master who first served us. ■

REFERENCES

1. All the anecdotes are true, but names are changed throughout.
2. Clear J. *Atomic Habits*. New York: Random House Business, 2018.
3. Harold Shipman was a GP in northern England. In 2000 he was convicted of murdering 15 patients, though is thought to have killed up to 250. The reports of the inquiry into the case can be found at the UK National Archives. bit.ly/3p8LPy9
4. Galatians 5:15
5. Romans 16:20