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Response to Andrew Rollinson's paper

Alasdair Black

I want to thank Andrew for a very helpful, insightful and timely paper. Andrew rightly notes that while for a considerable time the social sciences have studied and been aware of the power dynamics within community and organisational settings while the church has been slow to discuss and recognise such dynamics. This situation is possibly due to the threatening nature of the subject or the sense that this form of analysis is contrary to a biblical world view. Yet while we have largely ignored the work of thinkers such as Foucault, which Andrew ably explains and elucidates (a task that is far from easy), our society has absorbed a great deal of this influence. It was the philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche who said, 'power not truth'. By this he meant that the world is not shaped by truth, but by those who are able to choose what truth is, who wield power. Such a perspective has increasingly influenced our thinking. A cultural Marxism which interprets all social relations in terms of their power dynamics has not only permeated society at large and our media, but our churches. They who hold power are cast as the oppressors who dispossess and deprive others not only of their voice, but their human worth and value. Yet how applicable is this understanding of power in the Christian community?

Andrew's paper invites us to engage with this question. He claims Christian churches are particularly naïve when it comes to issues of power and the way the self and the institution are shaped by such dynamics. Such a notion deserves a qualified acceptance. I would contend that when it comes to an understanding of what can be called 'organismal power dynamics' most leaders are very aware. Andrew references sociologist Steven Luke's 1974 thesis which argues organisational power has three expressions or components:

1. Decision-making, which is concerned with the activities of the decision makers.

2. Non-decision making, which is concerned with the way in which power is used to limit the range of decisions that the decision makers can choose from.

3. Shaping desires, which is concerned with the ways in which individuals can have their attitudes and beliefs manipulated so as to accept a decision which is not in their own true interests, as when people have their ideas manipulated by an advertising campaign.

Although we would not portray preaching in such ideological terms as the last of these, most leaders are aware of these powers in relation to the Christian community. They would recognise that while they do not always have the power to make the decision, they do determine the grounds on which a decision is made. Equally congregations are aware of these power dynamics. Those familiar with the language of Baptist church meetings or those persistent emails will know that often a leader is no longer perceived as acting purely in terms of the truth or the good of the community. Decisions are interpreted according to a predetermined personal or corporate agenda rooted in position and power. Whether such a situation is positive or not is hard to determine but is a reality of modern ministry.

Nevertheless, as Andrew claims there is a degree of naivety and lack of self-awareness in relation to power, especially in terms of what I would call 'inter-personal power dynamics'. Movements like 'Me Too' and 'Black Lives Matter' have very much brought to the fore the personal abuse that can stem from relational power imbalances. We are now much more aware of how a power disparity in an adult relationship can lead to a sense of abuse even when a relationship is consensual and mutual. The power dynamics between doctor and patient, lecturer and student, police officer and witness, or even minister and congregant are pregnant with the possibility of damage to the self. Given this context there is real merit in Andrew's use of Foucault to highlight the subtle and less obvious uses of power which can wound. Yet his paper not only invites us to consider the potential for abuse both physically and spiritually in clerical relationships with congregants but holds out the prospect of the positive use of such asymmetrical power relationships. It asks how power can allow space for the formation of Christ-likeness in Christian discipleship and the 'shaping of the self'. This question would seem of the utmost importance in our present context and invites clerical self-reflection and adaptation. It also invites pressing considerations for ministerial training, formation and models of expression.

However, while these considerations are worthwhile and important, they could play into the anti-power and institutional rhetoric of the post-modernists. This is made more problematic by the lack of definition of power and its nature. To define power purely in terms of the 'ability to enable change' lacks specificity and is so general its usefulness needs to be questioned. The word 'power' I would also contend carries implicit negative connotations for Protestant evangelical ecclesiology. It is hard to think of a church celebrating a leader's power! Although Andrew's paper acknowledges not all power is bad, I'm not sure it rehabilitates the notion. It seems to work very much within the confines of a post-modern critique

and interpretation which is always pulling towards the idea of power disparity as manipulative and self-interested. Yet in such analysis we run the risk of falling into a purely reductionist perspective. For instance, if we understand preaching primarily as a vehicle for a particular power dynamic which shapes behaviour and thought, it becomes merely ideological. There is little room for the ideas of the proclamation of the word of God and the work of the Spirit which are treated as masking a particular hold on power by the preacher. Cynicism and suspicion prevail.

Equally I think there can be confusion over the distinction between 'inter-personal' and 'organisational' power dynamics. The way one interacts with an individual is open to variance, but the way one behaves within an organisation is often constrained by the organisation itself. This was very much illustrated by the sociologist Robert Michels in the 1940s. In considering what I will call 'functionality', the inevitable and necessary functioning of an organisation, he held all voluntary organisations are inevitably oligarchic. Within any organisation we will find a few people who make the key decisions while the rest of the membership are essentially powerless. Michels termed this the 'iron law of oligarchy', by which he meant that no organisation could ever be democratic or allow true participation in decision making by its members. Although I would be reticent to accept such an analysis and think it overly cynical it points to what I would call 'the nature of a thing'. One could easily argue – despite our varying theologies of leadership and governance – there is a propensity to oligarchic structures and expressions in our churches. The reason for this is not necessarily power crazed leaders imposing their wills, in fact many leaders would try and resist such a model, but it is the inevitable consequence of the nature of the organisation. One could even argue an ecclesiastical body would not function if it was not so. What I often see is leaders and congregations, perhaps in the light of the post-modern conceptions of power, working against the organisation. Rather like health and safety legislation we have got so concerned with what might happen we curtail the exercising of effective leadership and organisational functionality brings about frustration, disillusionment, conflict and inevitable decline. Is it not time that we recognise that not all voices or roles within a church are equal and work within the power dynamics which are implicit within the givenness of the organisation? Instead we have ministry leaders who feel guilty and tainted by power and congregations who want to ensure it will stay that way.

This then leads to a further question as to whether there is ever a legitimate expression of power within the church. Andrew's paper touches on this in terms of 'servant leadership' and the counter-cultural expression of the lamb upon the throne in Revelation. While attracted to the

imagery and force of these concepts of power in many situations I've seen them used to facilitate the abdication of leadership allowing churches to lurch into chaos and confusion. Sometimes servant leadership is standing up and asserting yourself, usually at considerable cost and criticism, in the face of something which would harm or destroy the church. It is not allowing certain caustic and malevolent agendas to prevail and does involve the overt ascertain of power and position. Yet can this ever be legitimate? Our dominant culture would probably say no.

Part of the problem here I think is that our critique of clerical power is too one sided. It is cast as the power of the leader over the congregant who is viewed relatively passively. Within such a perspective it is easy to fall into the implicit assumption which sees things in terms of perpetrator and victim. Yet we need a much more nuanced view of the dynamics of power. At the beginning of the twentieth century the sociologist Max Weber was acutely aware of the deficiencies of using the concept of power in relation to bureaucracies and organisations. He argued that if rather than thinking in terms of power we spoke of coercion and authority our analysis would be much more effective. According to Weber, organisational coercion is 'punishment centred' and fear driven and is based upon the imposition of rules and the ensuring of conformity as an end in itself. It is concerned with the need to extract obedience from a group and the imposition either of a corporate or individual will on the other. This end is achieved through both psychological and sociological means. By way of contrast, authority is never imposed, but always granted and is the basis of what he calls 'legitimate rule'. Authority is based on the consent of the other and the willingness to accept direction and render obedience.

This authority for Weber was invariably grounded in one of three 'ideal types of legitimation': Charismatic where you granted 'consent 'because of the person; Traditional which consented because of the office; and Rational-legal where a person's role over another was accepted on pragmatic grounds and the nature of expertise. The significance of Weber's analysis is that he sees power not as something that is done to you, or as a dialectic of those with power and those without power, but as a mutual act. Such a concept of requisite authority is I think entirely necessary to see true Christian discipleship and the 'shaping of the self'. Without this I don't think we take sufficient congruence of the biblical ideas of 'submission' to leaders and the role this plays in Christian formation. Even such language makes the post-modernist uncomfortable. Equally it is important to ensure this concept of authority does not become imposed or coerced, but always remains granted and consensual. It also requires the presence of trust on the part of the congregation and altruism on the part of the leader. I believe it is in part the loss of these

things, due to abuse and misappropriation, which has made the concept of power so problematic. We feel we must protect ourselves and others from power rather than understand the mutual dynamics which the exercising of authority invites. Therefore, my fear is that if we only focus on those who are perceived as wielding power we will miss an important element to the 'shaping of the self' and always inadvertently see the leader set over and against the congregant.

Nevertheless, Andrew's paper is significant and opens up a series of important horizons. It requires us to ask difficult questions about the nature of power in our ecclesiastical settings and how it shapes our life together. It also shows the way in which port-modern critiques can feed into our understanding of Christian discipleship and ministry and is very much deserving of further consideration.