

# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## *Power and a Powerless Church: A Reflection Essay on *Not So With You: Power and Leadership for the Church*<sup>1</sup>*

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In 2005, I became the chaplain to one of Canada’s largest public research universities. Having stepped out of the church world and into the academic world, it felt to me as if overnight I was confronted with stories of the church’s abuse of power. This was around the time when the general Canadian population was beginning to respond to the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. It was the same year that the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops launched a panel to establish a national protocol for addressing the sharp rise in rumours, accusations and instances of clerical abuse since the 1960s.

A couple of years later, in 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology on behalf of the federal Canadian government for the long history of Indian Residential



Schools for children from First Nations. The vast majority of these schools were run by Christian denominations and churches. In these schools, physical, sexual and spiritual abuse of children was rampant. Thousands of children in church-run schools died from malnutrition, disease and dehumanizing violence, only to be buried in unmarked mass graves.

More recently, in 2020, French Canadian hero and founder of L’Arche, Jean Vanier, was found to have sexually abused multiple women over his career. This was a shocking revelation for the nation on its own but additionally so because Vanier was the son of Georges Vanier, Canada’s 19<sup>th</sup> Governor General (the federal representative of the Canadian monarch).

In 2022, Ontario megachurch pastor and bestselling author Bruxy Cavey was arrested and charged with sexually

<sup>1</sup> Mark Stirling and Mark Meynell, Eds., *Not So With You: Power and Leadership for the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

assaulting multiple women during his long tenure as pastor of The Meeting House. The church's own investigation concluded that Cavey had abused his power and authority as a pastor and revoked his pastoral credentials. Cavey published an apology, though he is still awaiting trial in the courts.

In 2023, popular evangelical Canadian theologian John Stackhouse was terminated by Crandall University for sexual harassment. National Canadian news investigations revealed a pattern of Christian universities quietly parting ways with Stackhouse and using “non-disclosure agreements” to cover up allegations brought against him by female students.

To this day, I wonder why I didn't pay more attention to these abuses of power by churches and Christian leaders. It's not as though this only started happening in 2005. Throughout my lifetime, prominent American pastors have been found using their pastoral authority for personal gain (a very good basic definition of abuse of power in the church). Names like Kenneth Copeland, Jim Cymbala, Mark Driscoll, Ted Haggard, Jimmy Swaggart, Ravi Zacharias, Carl Lentz and many others have received significant legal and media attention. Sociologists (Peter Schuurman), historians (Kristin Kobes Du Mez), psychologists (Diane Langberg), lawyers (Rachael DenHollander) and journalists (Tim Alberta) have been among the many professionals working to understand and raise awareness of the phenomenon of abuse of power in the church and among Christian leaders. In part, how these scandals have negatively affected the general population's perceptions of the church has been captured by David Kinnaman, the President of the Barna Institute, an evangelical Christian research group, in his book *unChristian* (2007).



Rajasekharan Parameswaran, *Pain in Wine Red* (2020)

## The Power of the Church

Nearly fifteen years ago, it was stories like these that prompted my own academic research into the church's power in society. My theological investigation began with the thought that if there were (legitimate, in many cases) claims that the church has abused its power, then the natural question to ask would be: What is the power of the church, in its positive sense, that can be abused? I began my 2020 book, *The Power of the Church*, with an especially poignant example of abuse of ecclesial power that was later discovered to be a hoax: in 2013, evangelical Brazilian pastor Valdeci Sobrino Picanto was described as preaching that the Holy Spirit resided in his penis. Not only that, it was claimed that through an ugly combination of personal charisma and ecclesial authority, he raped members of his congregation in order to share this “gift” with them. Though this example is not factually true, it is uncomfortably close to what has happened to countless vulnerable people. Whenever abuse of power in the church happens, it is a grotesque distortion of the power and authority that resides in the church, both as an institution within society and as a movement of people within a culture.

For many people who live in parts of the world impacted throughout history by the church as a civic institution and Christian activity in culture, it is very nearly obvious to see that the church exerts a form of power in the world. The church has influence within the course of human society and history. Many contemporary institutions and entire academic disciplines have their roots in the church's use of its power. Thus, it should come as no surprise that allegations (and proven instances) of the church's abuse of that power arise. Exactly what kind of power the church is authorized to legitimately exercise (including where and when) is an area of significant reflection and debate. The Protestant Reformation was sparked (in part) by questions about systemic forms of abuse and manipulation within the hierarchical structure of the church (as well as its official and practical theology).

My own view is that we cannot adequately address something like “the power of the church” (before we even consider its abuse) without understanding the church as a bi-modal organism-institution within human culture and society and the church's theological place in the historically-unfolding potentials of God's creation. In this way, I stand within the Reformed tradition of Western Christianity as articulated by, for example, Abraham Kuyper and the missional neo-Calvinist line of world-engaging Christian faith that follows him.

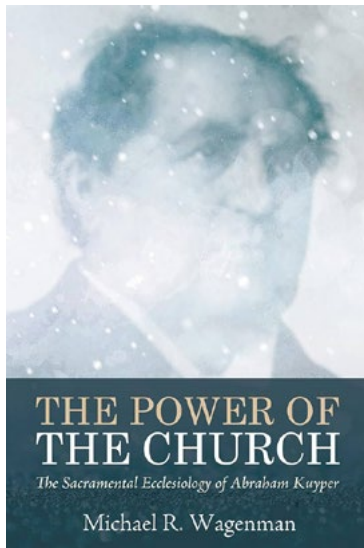
On the one hand, along with schools, governments and businesses, the church is a civic institution within society.

The church is a building with an address. It has an institutional structure with office bearers, bylaws and articles of incorporation which give it legal standing. The Reformed tradition refers to the “institutional church” as the “gathered church” where God’s good announcement for life is proclaimed in word, sacrament, discipleship and diaconal acts of justice and mercy.

On the other hand, and of equal theological importance, the church is an inspired movement of Jesus-people within culture. The church is Christian individuals and groups, animated by the Spirit of Jesus, actively loving and serving their neighbours in need wherever they are found in everyday life and in every field of human endeavour. This is the “sent church” which seeks to incarnate God’s love and grace in the midst of every human experience – pain and suffering as well as joy and awe. The Reformed tradition refers to this as the “organic” church because it isn’t hierarchical but is a living and diffuse organism within the wider ecosystem of human culture.

My argument in *The Power of the Church* is that, in both of these modes of existence, the church’s power is unique and limited. To be specific, it is sacramentally *kerygmatic*. This is to say that the church has a power that is unlike the kinds of power one would find in other areas of human life or in other civic institutions. By “kerygmatic,” I mean that the church (in both modes: gathered and sent) exists to *announce* God’s gracious invitation to (re)new(ed) human life in the divine fellowship which Scripture calls New Creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) or “the new heaven and earth” (Isa 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev 21:1). By “sacramental” I mean that this *kerygma*/announcement is both the sign and the instrument of God’s grace at work in the world. But the church’s power is unique not only in its *content* but also in its *form*. The church’s power is exercised through an equally unique *means*: *kenosis* (emptying) rather than coercion, incarnation rather than disembodied other-worldliness, and sacramental mysticism rather than scientific certainty.

The church, in its two modes of existence in the world (institutional and organic), has a *kerygmatic* power that is for its engagement with the whole of life. As I say, “The institutional church has received the Word of God and its very purpose is for the further proclamation of the Word through sanctified Christian lives to the world” (275). The institutional (“gathered”) church serves the organic (“sent”) church so that the church may serve the world the bread of life in love (John 6:35). But what does this look like in practical ministry terms,



especially when fallible human beings have ecclesial agency that can lead to abuses of this power?

### “Not So With You”

Mark Stirling and Mark Meynell have recently published a helpful collection of essays related to this topic of power and leadership in the church. Taken as a whole, the book is a helpful reflection on how actual ministry practice often falls far short of lofty theological ideals we have for the church. Drawing on insights from a range of scholars like Chris Wright, Grant Macaskill, Sam Allberry and others, Stirling and Meynell cover

both the biblical-theological foundations for reflecting on abuse of power in the church as well as the practical and pastoral reflections needed for responding to allegations and proven instances of abuse, manipulation and domination by church leaders. It is their “hope and prayer that this book contributes to a seismic shift in church culture” (235), a shift that has come to be termed more broadly as “trauma-informed ministry.”

Beginning with an analogy might assist us in these issues around abuse of power and leadership in the church. In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul writes to husbands and wives with the implication (seen especially in verse 32) that marriage is itself a witness to the world about who God is and what God is like in his revelation through Jesus Christ. Stirling makes a similar argument when it comes to the church and church leadership. He says that the biblical-theological foundation for addressing abuse of power in the church “is traceable to a misunderstanding, and consequently a misrepresentation, of God and the gospel” (xiii). That is, “power and leadership [in the church] are the means of giving oneself *to* others, not the means of getting something for oneself *from* others” (3). Abuse of power occurs within the church precisely where and when this misunderstanding and misdirection get underway.

Stirling locates the paradigm for power in the church in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, especially the Christ-hymn of chapter 2. Based on this, Stirling offers this definition: “Power is granted to empower humble, self-giving service of others for the sake of their growth and flourishing as creatures in God’s image” (13). The biblical example they cite of someone who misunderstands this kind of power is Moses who, because he misrepresented God through his actions, is prohibited from entering the land of promise. Stirling observes that in Numbers 20:2-13, when Moses strikes the rock (rather than speaking to it), he “communicates anger to

the people ... In communicating harshness instead of God's kindness, Moses had misrepresented the character of God" (200–201). How we exercise ecclesial power is a form of bearing witness to God.

With this framework for power presented, Stirling and Meynell turn to the practical and pastoral dynamics for church ministry and leadership. They argue that unhealthy leadership styles create an ethos within a congregation that provides the context for abuse within the church to emerge. Stirling in particular highlights the various ways "abuse of power flourishes in the dark" (201): when people in a congregation are made to feel that certain things can't be spoken about explicitly, when feedback is discouraged, when competitiveness creeps into marketing models of ministry, when people leave a congregation and are then spoken about shamingly, when ministry decisions are imposed by disconnected authoritarian leaders, and when ministry "success" is envisioned in narrowly "technical" ways.

In perceptive ways, Stirling describes how ideological capture occurs within church leadership. Readers may be reminded of Jacques Ellul's insightful work on *technique* (see, for example, *The Technological Society*, 1964). When people are transformed from ends in themselves to means to another's end, unhealthy congregations become especially prone to abuse. For example, "when combined with the dynamics of ideology and a leader with the power to make it happen, God's people are consistently misused as the raw material to make a leader's plan for 'utopia' a reality" (270). The ways church leaders can become the congregation's focal point, how orderliness and success can become the ministry goals, and how ministry can be reduced to "devotion to program and technique" are all helpful signposts of danger. Instead of these dangers, Stirling's argument runs in parallel to other efforts to raise the social-emotional intelligence of leaders, not to mention their ministry being grounded biblically and theologically rather than in manipulative methods (209, 215).

In their conclusion, Meynell reminds readers that the God we serve in the church is most fully known in and through Jesus who never broke a bruised reed nor snuffed out a smouldering wick but relentlessly pursued God's justice for the oppressed and overlooked (Isa 42:3 and Matt 12:20). Thus, it is all the more critical that the church address its failures around abuse of power because the church is God's ambassador and representative to the world.

Meynell highlights three key areas where the church and church leaders can grow in safeguarding ministry from these concerns. First, abuse of power in the church (sometimes called "spiritual abuse" – though this is a debated term in the relevant literature) is a real phenomenon and often has

catastrophic psycho-social-spiritual effects on survivors. Meynell alerts the reader to some of the legal debates addressing this terminology. For example, how is "spiritual abuse" different from "emotional abuse"? Solid references to other trusted resources on this topic are provided, with Chuck DeGroat and Ken Blue receiving special mention.

Meynell clearly describes how abuse of power in the church is a real phenomenon and not just something faulty in someone's faith or personality. He explains how abusers gain theological sanction: "the abuser's exploitation of their ecclesiastical position or authority, and, by inference, their divine sanction to dominate, control, or manipulate a person" (221). This is what makes abuse of power in the church so complex as well as so disastrous: abusive leaders, through their role or position within the church's structure, misrepresent God by explicitly or implicitly communicating, "This is what God is like. And this is what you're supposed to do if you want to obey God – and I know for certain because I've been authorized by God to tell you this." Meynell is perceptive in saying "That [institutional legitimation] is what makes this [abuse of ecclesial power] so odious" (221).

Second, Meynell addresses how churches handle complaints and accusations of abuse from leaders. He argues that this needs to be handled much more robustly in most churches, primarily because it is an issue that touches on so many interrelated topics like employment policies, accountability and safeguarding, and specific ministry contexts like discipleship and mentoring where a power imbalance exists by definition. Meynell encourages churches to see this as an important aspect of the institutional church's administrative ministry. In the church, leaders do not have what he calls "moral superiority" from which to control others in a domineering way. Without sustained and critical attention to these power imbalances, he says, "a mentoring relationship is most vulnerable to abuses" (231).

Third, Meynell reminds us that in the church we seek the same unity of truth and love that Jesus embodied (John 1:14). This will mean that after an instance of abuse has occurred, congregations should naturally desire a form of repentance that leads to a healing that includes reconciliation and renewal for all involved. For many churches, this desired outcome may be counter-cultural because revenge or retribution, blaming and scapegoating, may be more culturally the norm or the assumed expectation. Meynell reminds us that when we're considering abuse of power in the church, forgiveness is something different from denial. Denial often happens when an overly "spiritual" response doesn't actually address the real, practical and tangible harms done to real people. Forgiving a leader who has abused their power doesn't equate to that leader (immediately or ever)



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Silence* (1907)

being trustworthy again or allowing them to remain in their position after a routine expression of regret. Meynell reminds us that “it has been a grim feature of many recent abuse cases on either side of the Atlantic that perpetrators have been rushed back into leadership positions without the true nature of their abuses being faced” (234).

### Further Reflections on Church, Power, and Leadership

Why are extended reflections on abuse of power in the church, such as this essay, necessary and important elements of the discussion around Christian faith and practice today? In part, this is what being honest involves – both before God, ourselves and the wider world in which the church exists. But as I’ve found in my own research, part of the answer is that by engaging these distressing realities we have the opportunity to engage in further reflection on the intersections between theology and ministry ethics that open up new opportunities for conscious and intentional ways of being faithful today. As we bring Stirling and Meynell into critical conversation with other relevant voices, some further reflections on church, power and leadership might spark further insights into what it means to be the people of God in our own contexts.

My first question here is: when speaking about “abuse of power in the church,” what exactly do we mean by “church”? Stirling clarifies in a footnote that by “church” the authors

have in mind both institutional congregations and also any parachurch “Christian organization” (200). This is a helpful definition but it doesn’t fully encompass what the New Testament authors intend with *ekklesia* and this can therefore limit what we imagine in our contexts today when we hear the term “church.”

This is where Abraham Kuyper’s ecclesiology is especially helpful for Christians who only tend to conceive of “church” as institutional buildings and parachurch organizations. As noted above, Kuyper clearly distinguished between two modes of the church’s existence in the world – as both a gathered institution in society as well as an organically sent movement of Christian people in the whole of life in human culture. So, when we speak of abuse of power in the *church*, it is most helpful to include a robust understanding of both modes, and for many, especially this more dispersed “sent” or “organic” mode of the church. This means that we will continue to be attentive to the hierarchical power dynamics in local congregations as well as denominations, regional church assemblies and the official leaders in all institutional leadership roles.

But in addition to this, when we speak of the church in its sent/organic mode, we ought also to attend to any individual or group, however informal, who conceive of their action in the world as in some way being authorized or validated or guided by their Christian faith. It is this element of the *organic* witness of the church-as-people in everyday life that is especially important when it comes to perceiving the subtle ways in which the power of the church can be abused. When Christians live their lives in the world, in the many spheres of human culture, do they imaginatively claim a privileged “moral superiority” that explicitly or implicitly leads them to believe they have special legitimacy or authority to exercise a coercive hierarchical authoritarianism over others, whether in a domineering or imposing way or not? This is of equal concern if we are truly to get to the root of the abuse of ecclesial power.

In situations like these, where a Christian’s public life is rooted in a presumption of divine authority over others, even forms of abuse can become permissible through this process of legitimation. It is this claim to divinely-bestowed moral superiority, not only within the institutional church but also in the sent/organic church, that can justify any form of behaviour with an ultimate level of authority that is beyond question and to which no higher court of appeal is possible. Even though we don’t often tend to think of “church” in this more robust way, this broadest possible conception of “church” helps us attend more closely to the ways in which power can be appropriated and operate in ways that extend far beyond mere institutional governance or individual moralistic piety.

A similar critical depth is necessary when we approach this amorphous concept of “power.” Too often, when discussions of abuse of power in the church emerge, a simplistic or reductionistic posture is taken to understanding power. We can easily assume that power is power, no matter the context. Or, especially in Christian circles, a view of power can emerge which is little more than superficial moralism and this also unhelpfully narrows all that we ought to conceive as power.

Stirling says that “Power is for self-giving, not for selfish gain” (xiv). This is grounded in his reading of the Christ hymn in Philippians 2 which shows “us the supreme example of One who had all the power in the universe at his command and chose to use it in humble, painful, costly, and loving service” (12). There’s nothing wrong with this emphasis on loving service of others. In fact, the world would be a much safer place if more were animated to live in the way of Jesus washing his disciples’ (including his betrayer’s) feet, as recorded in John 13. But our question here is whether this is a sufficiently granular understanding of power to fully address the nuanced and subtle ways in which power is exercised in the church, as both institution and organism.

In the Dutch Reformed Christian tradition, as in some forms of postmodern thought, power is understood as fundamentally an irreducibly multivalent part of God’s creation. The philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) systematized Kuyper’s concept of “sphere sovereignty.” For Kuyper, God’s creation is composed of a multitude of

“spheres” of human activity (family, government, education, etc.). Dooyeweerd identified both how each sphere is animated by its own “power” and also how God’s norming creational laws govern the structurally-sound exercise of those sphere-specific powers. Thus, within this framework, there isn’t just *power* but a variety of *powers* at work in the various arenas or spheres of cultural life. The coercive power of the state is different from the kerygmatic power of the church, for example. Viewing the issue of abuse of power in the church through this theological and philosophical lens means that one key way in which power is abused in the church is when a power that is foreign to the sphere of the church begins to take hold and operate within the church. This leads to unauthorized and ideological uses of power which abuses. As just noted, this would be when the church begins to function with a *coercive* power to demand loyalty of its members like the state can do of its citizens.

Consider, for example, how power is related to its corollary: authority. Authority is that which legitimizes the exercise of power. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018), Paulo Freire has written perceptively that “There is no freedom without authority, but there is also no authority without freedom.... Freedom and authority cannot be isolated, but must be considered in relationship to each other.... Just as authority cannot exist without freedom, and vice versa, authoritarianism cannot exist without denying freedom” (178). In most if not all cases of abuse of power in the church, the issue is precisely this: the leader’s erasure of an other’s freedom by the leader’s claim to divine authority, or what has been called elsewhere the “will-to-power.”

In *Confronting the Will-to-Power* (2001), Mark Lovatt has engaged in a critical analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the “will-to-power.” His work has shown that our cultural stories – like those we have about power – coalesce into ideologies which are manifestations of deeper, hidden realities and unresolved dynamics at work within a culture (18). In this way, his work has parallels with the postmodern philosophy of Michel Foucault who worked to show how understandings and forms of power become institutionalized within a culture. Over time, these cultural assumptions become legally embedded forms of power and authority that we accept as “normal” and thus are beyond critique precisely because we no longer perceive them. Systemic forms of power are simply the water we swim in. They



Ford Madox Brown, *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* (1852-1856)

are “just the way things are.” How much of contemporary Western Christianity is embroiled in abuses of power exactly because of cultural narratives about power which have been accepted uncritically by individuals, groups and congregations and have become established as “normal” or even “the way things should be” when in fact they are deeply flawed? In such situations, addressing abuses of power has the potential to liberate us from dehumanizing assumptions, beliefs and behaviours and invite us into a truly renewed and reforming approach to ministry leadership.

These reflections on church and power, if given enough time and space, should cause us to begin the process of reforming our understanding and exercise of “leadership” in the church – which, in turn, would be a part of addressing the abuse of power in the church. Leadership is often what we call the exercise of power in the church. Stirling notes that too often when we speak about “leadership” in the church we ought to be more concerned with “service” (xiv). To what extent has the church listened to the valid critiques of religious authority and “leadership”? Christopher Hitchens, for example, notes in his memoir, *Hitch-22* (2010), that “The fact that the headmaster held the prayerbook and the Bible during the services drove home to me the obvious fact that religion is an excellent reinforcement of shaky temporal authority” (54).

Problematic cultural ideas about leadership, therefore, can become the soil in which abuse of power grows within the church. Often, that abuse begins when church leadership is understood hierarchically and combined with a technical achievement of the leader’s goals despite the human integrity of others. As noted above, Lovatt has traced this impulse

for hierarchical leadership to Nietzsche’s will-to-power, “an aggressive and self-centered drive for power [through force], a will which forgets its own destiny and overwhelms its opponents” (37). Lovatt points to the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr as a corrective: the hierarchical will-to-power over others “is not only to be deplored, but actively resisted” (40).

Part of this resistance, for Lovatt, lies in a reawakening to Soren Kierkegaard’s perception that the natural human will-to-live is transformed into the will-to-power by “leaping from anxiety [due to the unknown potentials of life] into certainty” (29). Lovatt argues that this is precisely “The tragedy of the will-to-power ... it brings about the very destruction of the self which it was supposed to prevent” (126–127). Thus, salvation occurs “by recognizing the total unacceptability of the self’s agenda [for certainty and power], and all that this agenda has done, that the self feels the horror of the will-to-power, and the desire to be rid of it, which is necessary as a precursor for God doing exactly that” (129). This is also a theme of Jean-Marc Laporte’s *Patience and Power* (1987) in which he argues that our struggle against dehumanizing and dominating forms of power is “the struggle of sin and grace” at a structural level (7, 12). We must achieve, he says along with Kierkegaard, a “fuller realization of powerlessness” as “a crucial first step towards the power of grace” (14). This is a “first world” problem, where “the illusion of power is precisely what it clings to [that is, power]” rather than God’s grace (19).

Christian *service* is, therefore, different from power-infused conceptions of *leadership* because service orients one to God rather than one’s own certainty about how to secure



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Blind Leading the Blind*

life goals and objectives through the exercise of power (132). Service is the acceptance of one's powerlessness (*kenosis*) and this is why Lovatt argues that "Christ's teachings directly contradict the agenda of the will-to-power" (160). And, since human beings are social creatures and the church is a social body, the church is called to a deep discernment of these dynamics for the expression of loving service to the world. Or, as Freire puts it, "the fundamental theme of our epoch [is] that of *domination* – which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*" (103). The church is called to serve God's saving liberation from the domination of the will-to-power, even when it presents itself in the cultural guise of Christian or ecclesial *leadership*. In this way, the church today can only truly address the perplexing and destructive abuse of power through a deeply critical re-evaluation of ministry leadership when it has become infused with these cultural assumptions around hierarchical, coercive and dominating power which are the hallmarks of much of modern life.

## A Powerless Church

Kierkegaard's theme of powerlessness, also seen in Niebuhr and Laporte, is also echoed by Stirling's invitation to a deeper embrace of *kenosis* or "emptying" when it comes to addressing and responding to the abuse of power in the church. This "emptying" (Phil 2) is a constituent element of "the mind of Christ" that Paul urges us to recognize in God's gift of grace to us, and which I have also urged the church to reflect upon more deeply in its ministry today. The Reformed South African theologian Russell Botman has identified this issue of power as one of the ways in which the church must face the "question of how to live with the golden calf" ("Is Blood Thicker than Justice?", 361).

The ways in which power is conceived in liberal Western societies – at the economic, political and cultural levels – contributes to Christian assumptions about power which can too easily slide into the exercise of force, domination, coercion, manipulation and control over others. These cultural narratives have become normal in the social imaginary of our societies and even in our churches. Power, in the culture as well as in the church, is assumed to be an effective, efficient, normal and desirable *technique* because it accomplishes its goals with certainty and without any need for patience or critical reflection. The church, in both its gathered/institutional mode as well as its sent/organic mode, is God's liberated and liberating *servant* (not leader) in the world for extending grace and love, especially to the overlooked, marginalized and oppressed. A church of kenotic service is a church that, I've argued,

"is less concerned about its central social position or effective influence than whether it is God-honouring and



Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Worship of the Golden Calf* (detail) (1560-1562)

other-serving.... the kenotic nature of ecclesial kerygmatic power will take special note of those persons in our globalized world who are marginalized or stigmatized due to political, economic, or ideological forces. The church will pay careful attention to serve and equip them to reassert their dignity as fellow image-bearers of God and contribute to society (possibly even as a prophetic critique of and communal alternative to [fallen] society" (Wagenman, 2020, 275).

It remains my conviction that this transformation in our theology and practice of ministry in and through the church would contribute to our honest confrontation with abuse of power in the church. It is a challenging topic not only because of the great harm abuse of power does to the vulnerable but also because it requires us to critically engage the "golden calves" of our culturally ubiquitous idols. We would have to ask ourselves not only, "How can the church survive without power?" but also, "What would a powerless church look like today?" This might be that "seismic shift" Stirling and Meynell urge us towards when it comes to the church and power today.

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