

The Use and Abuse of Authority in God's Household

Prepared by the Session of Darebin Presbyterian Church - April 2024

The purpose of this document is to help the reader to:

- 1. Understand what the Bible says about authority in the church and in homes and what the Scriptures say when this authority is not godly.**
- 2. Know what to do when there is a failure in the use of authority by a church leader.**
- 3. Identify the abuse of authority in church leaders.**

When the word "leader" is used in this document, it will refer mostly to elders in churches tasked with the spiritual oversight of the church. The principles however apply to other leaders within the church who have some authority over others.

What does the Bible Say?

- **In the Church**

The Bible speaks of God entrusting a degree of authority in the leaders of churches.

*¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.
(Hebrews 13:7)*

The extent of that authority applies insofar as those leaders live consistently with God's teaching in the Bible and the example of Jesus. There are many examples in the Old and New Testament of religious leaders who did not live up to the teaching of the Bible and therefore their authority was of little worth to God and His people. This is Jesus speaking of the Pharisees:

⁶ He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*"These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

*⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.' (Mark 7:6-8 quoting Isaiah 29:13)*

Although the Pharisees knew the Scriptures, they paid only lip service to God's teaching. Jesus therefore rightly accused them of being hypocrites and the use of their authority was burdensome and damaging to those under their authority.

The contrast is the godly use of authority as exemplified by Jesus. Although Jesus had the authority of God, he used that authority in humble service of others (Philippians 2:6,7) rather than lording it over others for his own gain. Jesus had authority as God's King and yet he came to serve rather than be served (Mark 10:45). Although Jesus has God's authority – he does not lay a heavy yoke on others because his authority is exercised with a gentle and humble heart (Matthew 11:29).

Elders in churches are commanded to shepherd those under their authority like Jesus the Chief Shepherd (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-5). This authority must be used for the benefit of those under their authority and not for the benefit of the leader. Elders must never “lord” their authority over others for selfish gain but rather strive towards humble service like their Lord Jesus. All roles of authority within the church should reflect the same Christ-like character but with positions of greater authority comes greater responsibility and accountability (James 3:1), as they will be judged by God according to this greater responsibility.

- **In the Home**

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria is a complementarian Church. The Church believes that the Bible teaches that husbands and Fathers in Christian homes hold a position of leadership. The language used in the Scripture is that of “head” (Ephesians 5:23). Headship is exemplified by Christ-likeness for the good of the body. Headship is God-given authority to exercise loving, other-centred responsibility for the good of their wives and children in a way that honours Christ. There can never be any justification for headship to be used to coercively control those under their authority.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria's Statement on Domestic and Family Violence states this very clearly:

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria is firmly opposed to all forms of domestic and family violence. Husbands are specifically told, ‘Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (Eph 5:25) and are warned, to love their ‘wives and not be harsh with them...’ and to live with them ‘in an understanding way’ (Col 3:19; 1 Pet 3:7).

Therefore, any attempt to twist the biblical teaching to tacitly sanction domestic violence or abuse is a gross perversion of the Bible's teaching. Domestic and family violence is repugnant to God and an anathema to the biblical model of sacrificial love and service.¹

¹ Adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Oct 2017 (Min. 94.11). Available at www.pcv.org.au/resources/statements.

Family violence can take many forms including physical threat, financial abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, harassment, stalking or sexual abuse. The common element is controlling, coercive or dominating behaviour. In the majority of cases, men are the perpetrators of this violence.

Responding to family violence

If you are experiencing family violence in your home then we urge you to reach out to someone for help, such as a church leader or the [Safe Church Unit](#). You may find what is written below to be useful but we strongly believe you will be better helped by involving another person.

If you suspect that someone is suffering from family violence, then it is important that you consider what you can do to help them. The Safe Church Unit has a number of resources, including a Policy, Procedure and Practice manual, which can guide you through this. A particularly helpful document is the Domestic and Family Violence Response which is available upon request from Safe Church. What follows are some ideas from those resources.

A clear first step is to listen well to their story, without dismissing them but showing genuine concern for their safety. The safety of people is always the first and most important priority in any domestic and family violence (DFV) situation and should drive our decision-making and advice. If they are in imminent risk, it will be important to help them call police or to formulate a safety plan. If they are not in immediate danger, calling [Safe Steps](#) (1800 015 188) with them is a helpful next step in understanding what is happening to them. Even though as Christians we have a high view of marriage, separation (be it temporary or otherwise) for the sake of safety is always acceptable, no matter what.

At this point you should also call Safe Church (0499 090 449) as they are equipped to offer support and guidance. They will confidentially note down information you report.

When children in the home are subject to family violence directly, whether physical verbal violence, this requires mandatory reporting and so the police and Safe Church should be contacted immediately. If the children are indirectly at risk of harm through witnessing family violence occurring in their home, then it is also advisable to call Safe Church and [Child Protection Services](#) to understand what can be done. It is also advisable to help the family members contact [The Orange Door](#), which is a Victorian government service established to help people access the support they need, including safety planning, crisis support and referrals to other services.

It is advisable to involve church leaders as soon as possible, particularly the Session. This may not always be possible and if you are concerned about this, then you can seek advice from Safe Church.

If you intend to journey with this person, you will also find it helpful to become better informed yourself in understanding abuse and how to help victims of abuse.² These are the first steps in what will be a long journey that we must walk with those suffering in this way. But this is the kind of religion that our God accepts as pure and faultless when we care for the most vulnerable in distress (James 1:27).

If someone has been perpetrating family violence and has confessed this to you, it is important to help them to repent of this sin and to challenge them to stop this violence. This can be done particularly through the church leaders clearly stating the position of the PCV in regards to DFV and stating clearly that the church is firmly opposed to DFV. Church leaders must point them to the clear, firm stance of Scripture that believers are to repent of sin, change their behaviour and to challenge them to stop their abuse. The person must show evidence of repentance and change, which is real and meaningful, and which the victim of the DFV is satisfied is genuine and consistent. It is important not to minimise this sin by hearing their confession and not taking any further action.

A good first step is to go through the [No to Violence](#) website with them to help them understand the nature of what they are doing to others. Speaking to the elders will also be necessary in their shepherding of God's flock to ensure that sin of this nature is brought into the light of the gospel so that those who are vulnerable do not continue suffering in silence and so that a plan can be developed to put sin of this nature to death. For there to be lasting change, a plan will involve repentance, accountability and serious work at a heart and behavioural level over a long period of time. It is also worth noting that the person may not want to cooperate and may either deny their prior confession or refuse your input. This is another reason why seeking others to help you is important.

What happens when my church leaders fail?

Even the most godly leaders, husbands and fathers will at times fail in their God-given authority. When this happens, this requires humility and repentance on their part but also a congregation in which forgiveness is willing to be applied when there is sustained, consistent evidence of genuine repentance.

Godly leaders still sin in the same way as all believers sin. This might be through impatience, a broken promise, thoughtless words, a failure to listen, envy of those

² *"When Home Hurts – A Guide for responding wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church"* by Pierre & Wilson and *"Is it Abuse – A Biblical Guide to Identify Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims"* by Strickland are both written by Christians and helpful resources to become better equipped.

around them, pride and so on. When you identify sin, the first response given by Jesus is to raise that sin directly with your leader as you would with any Christian brother or sister (Matthew 18:15). However, as is touched on below, this may not always be possible, particularly in the case of abuse.

Scripture equips us to identify the ungodly behaviour of those in authority and to recognise it as sin. This sin needs to be dealt with like all sin needs to be dealt with. It needs to be confessed to God (1 John 1:9), repented of (2 Corinthians 7:10) and then put to death by the person (Colossians 3:5-8).

Leaders are particularly called to respond this way when their sin is pointed out to them given that Christian leaders are held to a higher standard than fellow believers (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9).

There is a difference in power between leaders and the led. There is a clear power difference between ordained leaders and the non-ordained. This means that in pointing out the sin of the leader by yourself, it might be helpful and appropriate to ask a godly and trustworthy person to accompany you in speaking to the leader. If this is the case, speak discreetly to another before speaking to the leader. It may also be helpful to speak to that person if you are unsure if what you are wanting to raise with the leader is a matter of sin or whether it is something different (eg. Difference in personality, preference or opinion). This is not gossip, but rather a confidential discussion to help you assess what you are experiencing and it is part of the process of dealing with sin.

The goal of pointing out this sin is for the good of the hearer such that it leads to repentance before Christ. In this way Jesus says you have “won them over” (Matthew 18:15). This applies to all believers including leaders in the church. Where there is repentance, you have achieved the goal of restoring that person gently to Christ (Galatians 6:1). It is also appropriate to forgive when there is genuine repentance (Colossians 3:12-14). As we rebuke sin, we must always remember to be conscious of our own sin and that we point out sin as fellow sinners saved by grace (Matthew 7:1-2, Galatians 6:1).

It is often helpful to seek wise counsel from others, outside the situation, to help you work out what exactly is occurring in the church, what your concerns are and the nature of those concerns. It might be helpful to see a Christian counsellor, or speak to an older, wise brother or sister in the faith, or perhaps to a church leader you know and trust outside of the church. This should be done in confidence, and with the aim to better understand what the situation is and discern what responses might be appropriate and/or necessary. In this way, wise counsel is sought, rather than gossip undertaken.

What happens when my leaders persist in unrepentant sin?

¹⁹ Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. ²⁰ But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning. ²¹ I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favouritism. ... ²⁴ The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. ²⁵ In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever. (1 Timothy 5:19-21, 24-25)

According to the Apostle Paul, elders must be held publicly accountable for their teaching and their life and he provides us with principles.

1. An accusation must be dealt with fairly (v.19)

Given that leadership is a public role in which a false accusation can be very damaging for the leader and his family, it is important to have two or three witnesses. This can guard against an individual wanting to simply “bring the minister/elder down”. However, in some cases, such as abuse, there will only be one eyewitness and we would not want to insist that leaders are unaccountable with regards to secret sin. Therefore another witness might be a friend who is willing to stand alongside the complainant. It might be another leader who has listened to the accusation, examined the evidence and is willing to act as a second witness. The key is that the process must be more than one person pitting their word against another.

2. Serious or unrepentant sin must be publicly rebuked (v.20)

The sin that Paul is most likely referring to in his letter are things like false teaching (4:1-3, 1:19-20), the love of money (6:3-5), various sins in 1:9-11 including sexual immorality as well as the behaviours that disqualify an elder: drunkenness, unfaithfulness, violence, lack of self-control, ill temper (3:2-7).

If this sin was public or well-known behaviour, which is typically the case where there are several witnesses, then it may need to be addressed by the Session publicly acknowledging it was wrong and inconsistent for a Christian leader. A failure to rebuke it publicly might lead to people thinking it was acceptable behaviour before God.

Public rebuke helps all in the congregation to be alert to their own sin before God and of the need to keep turning from sin and turning to Christ.

There may be occasions where it is not appropriate to rebuke the leader publicly. This could be for the sake of those who were sinned against to spare them further pain or where confidentiality is wise or necessary. Nevertheless, a rebuke can still be done in front of other relevant leaders, such as the elders, so that it serves as a reminder to the other elders of their responsibility and that sin reaches God's judgement even when hidden (v.25).

3. Discipline must be impartial without favouritism (v.21)

The outcome of a complaint against a leader must not be pre-determined or prejudiced either way. An eldership must also be careful not to show favouritism to one of their own when a complaint is made against them.

In the case of a complaint against a minister, the Presbyterian Church of Victoria Code provides a process in which the Presbytery is responsible for investigating and administering discipline.³ In this case, the Presbytery must be contacted to make the complaint.

If the complaint is against an elder, this should first be brought to the rest of Session, discreetly through another elder of the church for impartial hearing, investigation and discipline where necessary. But if there is good reason that Session will not show impartiality, then that complaint against an elder should be brought to the Presbytery clerk directly. You can contact the Presbytery of Melbourne West through its clerk at presbyterymelbwest@gmail.com.

Impartiality must also be shown in the case of criminal conduct which must not be dealt with "in-house" as though it was a matter for the church outside of government obligations. Criminal matters such as a range of sexual crimes and family violence must be reported to authorities under whom God has subjected us to (Romans 13:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-17, Titus 3:1-2).

Our Safe Church training also reminds us that the laws of our land require mandatory reporting of anything to do with child abuse – whether that is sexual, physical, emotional and psychological abuse, or neglect. Any suggestion of sexual misconduct with a minor must be reported, and the investigation left to others. In this case, you don't wait for two or three witnesses and it would be sin to do so, even if

³ **PCV Code 4.51 Complaints against ministers and licentiates**

4.51.1 The presbytery is the court of first instance for all matters relative to the life, character, doctrine and professional conduct of its ministers and licentiates.

4.51.2 The presbytery must take cognisance of any false teaching or inappropriate conduct of any such minister or licentiate as comes by regular process to its notice.

4.51.3 In complaints which are cases or matters of discipline, the presbytery shall conduct the business before it in accordance with the Code of Discipline and in harmony with the Articles of Agreement.

that allegation is against a leader of the church. Such serious matters must not be dealt with internally, and it is especially important when dealing with ministers who have power in a congregation that such allegations are investigated externally by people who have skill in gathering evidence regarding conduct which is often done in secret.

If you believe that there is evidence that requires a mandatory report against an elder or a minister, then the [Safe Church Unit](#) should be contacted along with the Police.

Some believers hesitate as they feel this might be “bringing a lawsuit” against a fellow believer (1 Corinthians 6). Sin of the matter being spoken about is not a civil matter as in 1 Corinthians 6 but of a serious criminal nature of which we are required to submit to authorities instituted by God.

How do I identify if there is an abuse of authority in my leaders?

Most leaders in the church do not set out to abuse others in the use of their God-given authority. But when leaders allow sin to grow and take hold of their hearts, they can be easily self-deceived and their authority can easily become self-serving and at worst abusive. This is a far cry from the self-giving and self-sacrificial authority of Jesus.

Godly leaders will be self-examining in an ongoing manner and able to receive rebuke and correction from others. In a godly leader, sin in these cases will not reflect a pattern of wilful intent but occurs on occasion as with any follower of Christ. Where there is deliberate and ongoing sin by ungodly leaders, this can also lead to spiritual abuse. The term “spiritual abuse” can at times be subjectively and broadly misapplied. But this does not diminish that it is very real for those who have suffered abuse of this nature. In contrast with the occasional sin followed by the repentance of the godly leader, spiritual abuse reflects a systematic pattern of wilful and ongoing sin that uses authority in a harmful way over those under its authority.

A definition by Oakley and Humphrey’s is as follows:

*Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context.*⁴

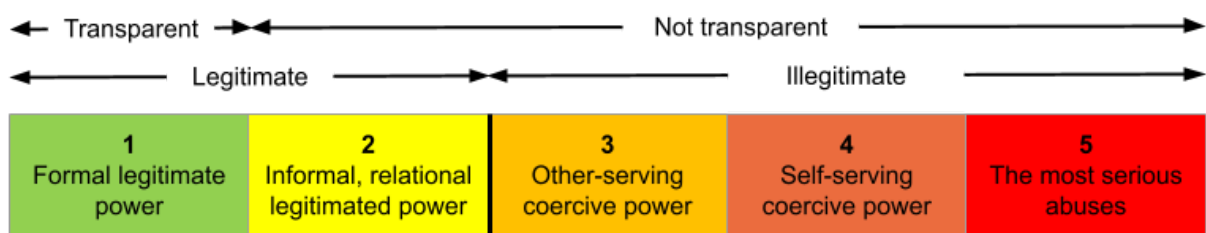
Churches are places where authority in relationships is recognised as a God-given reality. But when that authority becomes spiritually abusive, this has significant

⁴ *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* by Oakley & Humphreys (p.xiv)

detriment to those under that authority. When those in the congregation equate a Christian leader's authority on a similar level to that of Christ or God, spiritually abusive behaviour can have ongoing and devastating effects on the lives of those abused. Sadly, spiritual abuse can and has occurred in churches and in households that profess biblical faith in Christ.

It can be hard to identify spiritual abuse when it occurs in a church. Christian author, Marcus Honeysett, in his book "Powerful Leaders?" helpfully presents what he calls a "slippery slope" of leadership as it can at times be hard to know when the behaviour of a leader is sinful or not and when it starts to display a pattern of ongoing spiritual abuse. This spectrum of leadership is presented below, first as a summary figure adapted from Honeysett's book and then a full table with examples and commentary.

In this spectrum, categories 1-2 are not sinful and categories 3-5 are sinful. Category 5 is clearly abusive behaviour and category 3 has features of what some would say are abusive behaviours and category 4 is self-serving and at worst demonstrates abusive behaviour. This spectrum is also helpful in understanding the type of authority or power that someone can have by virtue of their relational influence which is typically exercised in private contexts.



The Spectrum of Leadership

(Taken from "Powerful Leaders?", by Marcus Honeysett)

1. Formal legitimate authority	<p><u>Example:</u> Teaching the Bible faithfully as elected elders, appointed Gospel Community leaders, Sunday School and Youth leaders.</p> <p>Authority is accountable, transparent, plural and not centred on one or two individuals. Authority serves the good of all and is practised in a Christ-centred, God-honouring manner.</p>
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2. Informal, relational legitimate authority	<p><u>Example:</u> Seeking prayer and wisdom from godly people in the church who may not hold a formal position of authority but have a high degree of respect and influence. Highly relational and appropriate when used for good.</p> <p>Authority may be expressed by informal leaders who are relationally connected. Leaders who have formal authority but also a high degree of trust and influence can also use this type of authority. Because of this more relational basis, it is likely to be less transparent and therefore harder to scrutinise when something is wrong.</p>
3. Illegitimate, Other-serving power	<p><u>Example:</u> A leader personally asks someone to do something for the good of the church without realising that the person feels under pressure to say yes. The leader may not realise their influence and the person doesn't feel like they can say no due to the power imbalance.</p> <p>There is less transparency and plurality of leadership in this situation where a person does not feel they can speak to another leader or speak of the pressure they feel as they don't want to disappoint the leader or the church. A culture of achieving the goal rather than caring for individuals is present. It is harder to establish the motivation of the leader and therefore to clearly know if the desire is sinful or not but the culture is unhealthy when there is a constant implicit or explicit pressure to say yes to everything asked.</p>
4. Self-serving coercive power	<p><u>Example:</u> A leader deliberately uses their authority for personal gain. This may also be indirect – the church grows and therefore the reputation of the leader also grows. The leader uses their authority to ask someone to do something with the knowledge that this will primarily or solely benefit the leader even at cost to the person being asked.</p> <p>Coercion and control are likely to be evidenced. People feel manipulated and maybe even dominated. Leaders are self-protective and do not like to be questioned. Clearly communicated roles and expectations are replaced with constant private requests that are not accountable to anyone but the leader. It is unbiblical and sinful in motivation and behaviour.</p>

<p>5. The most serious abuses</p>	<p><u>Example:</u> A leader uses their authority to deliberately harm others. This might be in the form of bullying, aggressive, threatening or exploitative behaviour.</p> <p>Abuse of power and position in these cases are clearly sinful and may also be criminal. A deliberate pattern of controlling behaviours is evident. Transparency is replaced with secrecy and concealment. Accountability has been corrupted to justify sinful behaviour or to deny it. Opponents are silenced, intimidated, blamed or removed. There is blatant hypocrisy and pretence by the leaders appearing godly in public and ungodly in private.</p>
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What should I do if I identify the use of illegitimate authority?

- **Category 3. Illegitimate, Other-serving power**

It is important to develop a church culture where it is okay to say “no” to a Christian leader without it being “no” to God. These are two different things. Saying no to a Christian leader can be for very godly reasons that please God. When you feel that the elders of the church have established a culture where it is difficult for an individual to say no to their personal requests, it is appropriate to speak to one or two other leaders (or godly people you trust) and to approach the eldership together to raise concern about the culture of the church in this regard. The growth of the church should not come at the health of individuals. We see the love Jesus demonstrates for one individual lost sheep compared to the ninety nine others which shows us how we also should value each person that God brings to our church (Luke 15:7).

- **Category 4. Self-serving coercive power**

If this is taking place in the church, it is also likely that those who are being coerced are also isolated and feeling that they are the only ones feeling this way. It is helpful to seek the wisdom of those who are godly and trustworthy in the church to understand if it is the case that others feel the same way in relation to the church leader. It is also likely to be the case that there is at least one dominant personality in the church leadership with little accountability rather than a shared leadership culture with good accountability. If there are others who are also feeling the same way towards this leader, then it is appropriate to gather together to raise these concerns with the Presbytery if the leader is the minister of the church. If it is an elder, then it is appropriate to raise these collective concerns with the minister or another member of Session.

- **Category 5. The most serious abuse cases**

If there is a leader perpetrating this kind of abuse then the culture of the leadership and church is seriously sinful and dysfunctional. If abuse of this type is going on,

then it is necessary to raise a complaint with the Presbytery and if the conduct is criminal then the police should also be contacted. When this type of abuse is taking place, it is also very hard to be the “whistle blower” as often there is a feeling of “am I the only one who feels this way?” or “maybe it’s my problem”. It takes courage to call out the sin of a leader in this way when it seems that everyone else thinks of them in glowing terms. Again, it is appropriate to approach godly and trustworthy people in the church to share your experience so that they can help you to take the next steps in bringing the sin of this leader into God’s light.

If you are in a position of helping others who have suffered spiritual abuse or have suffered in this way yourself, there are helpful resources written by Christian authors to better inform and equip you.⁵

Conclusion

This document has been prepared to help you better understand the nature of godly authority and what to do when you identify a misuse of authority in the home or the church. It is intended to sit within the wider resources and structures found within the Presbyterian Church of Victoria rather than replace them. May God strengthen you to serve him faithfully and to hold onto gospel hope in the midst of a fallen world.

42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:42-45

⁵ *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* by Oakley & Humphreys and *Powerful Leaders?: When Church Leadership Goes Wrong And How to Prevent It* by Honeysett.