

Redeeming
Power

Understanding
Authority
and **Abuse**
in the **Church**

Diane Langberg

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Prelude

Decades ago, when I first encountered victims of sexual abuse, I found myself in a foreign land. I did not know such things happened. It was not part of my experience, nor was it mentioned once in the psychological literature I read or while I earned two graduate degrees. The church dismissed me when I brought it up. I decided, by God's grace, to listen to the unbelieved and disenfranchised. Doing so has changed me and shaped my life.

My learning curve over the past forty-seven years as a Christian psychologist has been steep and long. I first learned about families in which sexual and domestic abuse were rampant and had been for generations. I have since sat with victims of trauma, violence, rape, and war. I have learned about people groups who have been crushed, oppressed, and enslaved. I have borne witness to this devastation in my Pennsylvania office and across six continents. I have listened to voices from Auschwitz, Rwanda, South Africa, Congo, and Cambodia while visiting death camps, churches full of bones, places of unspeakable poverty, victims of violent rape, and the Killing Fields, where *human beings were destroyed just because they were who God created them to be.*

I have also seen beauty, redemption, courage, and generosity, and I have been blessed beyond words by many who have been trashed by this world and its inhabitants. I have passed on those blessings to my children and grandchildren, to colleagues, clients, diverse audiences, and the global church.

My journey into the world of trauma began with one victim of abuse who, in tiny increments, courageously shared her story with me. I asked questions and worked hard to listen carefully. I became her student and a student of many more—humans created by God, his own artwork, wounded and damaged. I sat with people and learned to say, in essence, “Teach me what it is like to be you.” Somewhere along the way, the context of abuse broadened to include experiences at Christian camps, at schools, and in sports. I learned that boys and men were also abused.

I also worked with pastors, missionaries, and Christian leaders. They were depressed and anxious. They struggled with their roles and with the burdens of others. Many were burned out. And then one day everything collided as I began to realize that Christians in leadership positions were also abusing those under their care. This was difficult to absorb. I did not want it to be true. I didn’t understand it. *I learned that what happens in families also happens in the family of God.*

Slowly, I began to understand that power, deception, and abuse were all tangled up together. People who were highly esteemed and seen as godly were in fact deceiving themselves and others in order to commit and conceal ungodly deeds. As time went on, I saw entire systems do the same thing. Systemic abuse, an utterly foreign concept to me at the time, became clearer as I discovered that sometimes the people of God unite to “protect” God’s name by both committing and concealing actions that look nothing like God. God’s people were breaking his heart.

I was angry. I wept. I wanted it not to be true, and I wanted to quit. Sometimes I felt as if I were swimming in a sewer with a sign above the entrance that read, “Sanctuary.” I began to read everything I could to help me see. I went back to church history. I studied the Holocaust and other genocides. I read and reread the prophets, particularly Jeremiah. I buried myself in the Gospels. Little by little I began to see the systemic nature of abuse more clearly. I am still learning.

This book is the fruit of that process. God has invited us into the fellowship of his sufferings. It is not a place we want to go. It truly is a sewer. In entering, I began to learn that everything I encountered, Jesus had borne. That included my blindness, my resistance, and my fear of entering this place. But to refuse to enter, to turn away from what he sees, is to miss him. I have been given small glimpses into what it means to say, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14 NRSV). He was Immanuel in that space—God *with* us. And Christ calls us to be so like him in this world that others get a sense, a taste, of who he is and *know* that he is indeed with us.

I have been struck by how often we are told that Jesus *saw*. Matthew tells us that Jesus was going through all the cities and villages and that “*seeing* the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed [harassed] and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36 NASB). Jesus continues to see, and he invites us to stand with him and see—to feel the pain, the sorrow, the crushing, and the agony of precious sheep who have no shepherd, no caregiver, no comforter.

Much of Christendom today seems less interested in seeing as Jesus saw, less inclined to enter in, and far more interested in gaining power. We have acquired fame, money, status, reputation, and our own little kingdoms. We have read too many headlines about Christian leaders and Christian systems that look nothing like our Lord. I fear we have lost our way. It is time for those of us who name his name to stop and listen to

our King, who was moved with compassion, a true Shepherd longing to both feed and enfold the sheep.

We follow a God who listens to us and weeps with us. That is evident in the life of Jesus. The incarnation is perhaps the greatest expression ever seen of empathic listening. Jesus came and pitched his tent among us—a virtual refugee camp. That meant drinking our water, sharing our chores, experiencing our losses, joining in our laughter, and weeping with us when we mourned. We need to learn to listen as he does. You see, he knows what it is like to be you. He has given you the gift of being heard and known and asks you, in turn, to give it to others. He longs for us to walk with him, caring for the distressed, the fleeced, the ones damaged by violence and tossed aside. He desires us to look with his eyes of love and hear with his keen ears. He has invited us to labor *with* him and to be with others just as he was.

It has been a great privilege for me to learn from our Shepherd. He has taken me to places I never imagined existed. I have seen evil, darkness, and despair in precious humans, God's artwork. I have certainly made many mistakes. However, I have found God present there, loving, teaching, carrying, and redeeming. I pray that as we look together at power and our often twisted and abusive manipulations of it, God's light will expose us. I pray that we will together bow before the One who sits on the throne and who bears scars that should be ours and that we will learn from the Good and Great Shepherd how to protect, feed, and be a refuge for the lambs he loves. It is not a pretty journey, but we will find him working with us as we go. Yes, he will use you to bless others. He will also use *them* to change *you* into a greater likeness of him. He always works both sides.

I pray that this book will increase awareness and understanding of power and its abuse so that we can protect and defend those who have been abandoned by Christianity's broken

systems of power. For those who have been abused, my prayer is that in reading you will feel seen, protected, believed, and comforted. Some of you have left the church after experiencing abuses of power in the very place God means to be his sanctuary. If you see the church as a place of danger rather than of safety, please remember that, sadly, the church often fails to look and act like Jesus, making it easy to believe lies about who he is.

If you are a Christian leader, whether in a church, a non-profit ministry, or another sphere of influence, I pray that you will come to understand the kinds of power—conscious and unconscious—that come with your authority. I pray that you will understand your own power and learn how to use it wisely—to bless and not to harm. If you have used power in a way that has inflicted harm, I pray that you will bow before the throne of the One who became small on our behalf and speak truth to yourself and to others about the damage you have done. May you desire the truth and grace of God more than the esteem of human beings.

I grieve that the body of Christ has so often walked away from this work and turned its back on Christ and his invitation. May we all learn how to discern when power is being used wrongly and call it by its right name. We have lost much and damaged many. We have broken God's heart. I pray that we will ardently seek after him in these matters. He waits.

PART 1

Power Defined

one

The Source and Purpose of Power

The dynamics of power are ever present in my Christian psychology practice. Power can be a source of blessing, but when it is abused, untold damage to the body and name of Christ, often *in* the name of Christ, is done. For the sake of that body and that wonderful name, I believe we need to wrestle with the issue of power and understand how it can be used for healing or harm, for good or evil. I invite you to look with me more closely at what power is, where it comes from, and the impact it has on all of us. Power is inherent in being human. Even the most vulnerable among us have power. How we use it or withhold it determines our impact on others.

Sarah is tiny and very frail, only four days old. She knows nothing about herself or the world in which she has landed. She has no words. She cannot effectively use her body to go anywhere. Something does not feel right. She doesn't know what is wrong, or why it is wrong, or how to tend to her own distress. Alone and in the dark, she cries. *And she has power.*

Two exhausted, sleeping adults, jolted from their comfortable bed and much-needed rest, quickly head toward the cry. She has disrupted two people who can use words, who know what they want as well as what she needs, and who can move their bodies as they choose. They understand the tiny one's cry and they respond, tossing aside how they feel, along with their preference for sleep. They choose to get up and comfort the little one and feed her with attention, love, and milk. In comparison to Sarah, these adults wield an astounding amount of power, and they choose to use their power to bless her with their care.

Our English word *power* (Latin: *posse*, meaning “be able”) means “having the capacity to do something, to act or produce an effect, to influence people or events, or to have authority.” It also has harsher meanings: to master, dominate, coerce, or force. By our sheer presence in this world, we, God's image bearers, have power. The four-day-old infant has the power to rouse independent grown-ups out of a greatly desired and much-needed sleep. The reverse is also true: those grown-ups have obvious power over the infant. They can respond with attention and care or with anger at being disturbed. They can withhold care and respond with neglect and silence. The infant influences the adults. The adult responses affect the child. The power of the vulnerable infant to express her needs exposes the hearts of the more powerful adults. Over time, their habituated response to the infant shapes not only the infant's personhood but also the hearts of the adults. Our responses to the vulnerable expose who we are. This is an important principle to keep in mind as we consider the use—and misuse—of power.

Anyone remotely in touch with today's news has some awareness of how power can be used for good and for evil. We read about authoritarian tyrants and about people being tortured and imprisoned for their faith or for criticizing their government. We also read about people who give sacrificially to those who need help, spending days to search for a lost child

or devoting time, money, and effort to rescue those trafficked by others. Both lists are endless. Every human life is a force in this world. Our influence pours out perpetually. But if those in authority refuse to help others, turn a deaf ear, and harden themselves to the needs of others, then rejection, not care, becomes the predominant influence.

Power in the Genesis Story

What is the source of our power as humans? In Genesis, we read about how God invested humans with power. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (1:26–27 NASB). God made humans who bear his likeness and told them to rule. In Hebrew, the word *rule* means “to have dominion” or “to dominate.” What did God tell them to rule over? Over the fish, the birds, the cattle, the whole earth, and every creeping thing. Note the stunning omission in God’s directive: nowhere does he call humans to rule over each other! The man is not told to rule over the woman; neither is the woman to rule over the man. They are to rule together, in a duet, over all else God has created. They are to take the power God granted them and use it for good. Together. Genesis 1:28 continues with God telling humans to “fill the earth, and subdue *it*.” *Subdue* means “to conquer,” “to subjugate,” or “to keep under.” God created a one-flesh union and called that union of male and female to rule and subdue the earth, *not each other*.

Genesis 1 also tells us that God called Adam and Eve to fruitfulness. “God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful

and multiply” (v. 28 NASB). How do we do that? Obviously, humans who are fruitful increase their power simply by creating more humans. But humans are also meant to be fruitful in all areas of life. In essence, God created us to multiply his image and likeness in everything we do. God created humans in his own image, in his likeness. Power was given to humans, who reflected the God who made them. And what do we know about this God? He is good; he is faithful; he is a refuge; he is truth; he is love. So, God gave human beings power in order that they might bear God’s character in the world. And God blessed them; he pronounced a benediction over them and called them to be fruitful and multiply, to bear his likeness and bless the earth. Together.

We all know what happened after that. A cunning, deceptive creature who had utterly rejected the power of God and any likeness to him came and deceived the humans using God’s own words. “You want to be like God? You want to be in his likeness? You want the ability to judge between good and evil? You can have that by choosing what he has denied you.” And like the enemy, humans subsequently exercised their power to choose against God; they took what appeared good to them and fed themselves with it. The deception of promised good led them to choose disobedience to God. They used their power to choose evil when that power ought to have borne the likeness of God and been used to choose good. They wanted what they were meant to have: likeness to God. They wanted to discern good from evil. What they saw with their eyes appealed to their longings and their highest goal. But they took their God-given power and exercised it against him, deceived into believing they were choosing him.

They who bore the character of God used power in a way that gave them a likeness to the enemy of God. Like the king of Babylon, they said, “I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will *make myself* like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14 NIV). They forgot that any likeness to God was instilled by God himself.

Such a likeness cannot be humanly created. Their power was used not to bless but to harm, not just others but themselves as well. The abused power of the man and the woman produced outcomes that have rolled down from generation to generation, infecting us all.

Power of Personhood

To grasp the impact of power, we must have a sense of what a human is. Some concepts that have arisen out of my work with trauma victims may be helpful here.¹

First, to be human is to have a voice. The voice of God spoke everything into existence. To be created in his image is to have a self, to have a voice and creative expression. Abuse of power silences that self and the words, feelings, thoughts, and choices of the victim. Their desires are disregarded and irrelevant. Abuse of any kind is always damaging to the image of God in humans. The self is shattered, fractured, and silenced and cannot speak who it is into the world.

Second, to be human is to be in relationship. We were created in relationship to God himself and to one another. God entered this world in the flesh to reestablish a relationship that was broken. His image is reflected in relationship. Humans long for safe relationship. Abusive power violates and shatters relationship. It brings betrayal, fear, humiliation, loss of dignity, and shame. It isolates, endangers, creates barriers, and destroys bonds. It destroys empathy, trashes safety, and severs connection. Abusive power has a profound impact on our relationship with God and with others. Victims of abuse often view God through a gravely distorted lens, seeing him as the source of the evil they experience. The violation and destruction of faith at times of tremendous suffering is one of the greatest tragedies of the abuse of power.

Third, to be human is to have power and to shape the world. As we have seen, our Creator called us to rule and subdue. Those are power words. Go have impact; go make things grow; go change things. Abuse quashes and removes power. A victim feels useless, powerless, and ineffective, and the loss of dignity and purpose is profound. We are meant to work, to make things happen, to make things change simply because we are here. These aspects of voice, relationship, and power are rooted in the character of God.

Types of Human Power

There are many types of power. Verbal power involves using words, often in artful ways, to manage situations and control others. Verbally gifted humans can use words to bless others or to do terrible, long-lasting damage. A related kind of power we rarely think about is silence. Silence can be a wonderful gift. Silence can also be a weapon. The sting of silence used to punish or ignore goes very deep.

Emotional power is often, though not always, paired with verbal power. Emotions can be used to comfort another with empathy or to control what people say and do, often intimidating and silencing them. The power of anger or rage can terrify a human being, with or without words.

Power can manifest itself in physical size or strength. If one person weighs 220 pounds and another weighs 85 pounds, the power differential is obvious. The bigger can easily injure or crush the smaller. Physical presence can be powerful in other ways too. We have all known someone who was not larger than everyone else but whose presence could fill a room. That power of personality can control a room, a company, and even a country.

People with specialized knowledge can wield great power, speaking authoritatively and expecting what they say to be

accepted because they “know.” Positions of authority confer power. If I am a president, a coach, a doctor, or a professor, my job gives me the right to say and do many things; the circle of my “ruling and subduing” is larger than most. Depending on my position and the way it is understood, I may use that power to justify many wrong things and overreach extensively, particularly if I’m a respected authority figure.

Like silence, absence also has great power. Do you remember playing the trust game as a child? Your friend stood behind you, and you were supposed to fall backward and trust that they would catch you. It was a bit scary. The absence of your friend, their failure to “show up,” could mean injury. A parent who turns a blind eye to sexual abuse is absent when desperately needed. The result will be deep damage. The emotional absence of a spouse is deeply wounding. On the other hand, the refusal to join in with a group of bullies is a powerful and positive absence for the one being bullied.

Another type of power that some people wield is economic power. Money can buy many things in this world, and one of those things is power. That power can be used wisely and graciously—or it can be used to manipulate, control, and terrify.

Spiritual power is yet another kind of power that can be dangerous unless it is exercised in obedience to God. This form of power is used to control, manipulate, or intimidate others to meet one’s own needs or the needs of a particular organization, often by using words cloaked in nice-sounding spiritual language and concepts.

Finally, our cultures, families, tribes, secular and religious communities, and nations all have tremendous power in shaping our minds and lives. Culture is like oxygen—it’s always there, but we do not see it; it’s simply what is. Experiencing a different culture of worship, food, or dress can be a shock. Culture can be wonderfully enriching. It can also be full of arrogance, prejudice, and division, so we must pay close attention and use

our power and abilities to see and to think before swallowing the messages of our culture whole.

We will consider these kinds of power in much greater depth throughout this book. For now, we simply need to understand where power comes from and what its intended purpose is. We also need to be aware of the kinds of power we all have in varying degrees—and that we can use or withhold those powers for good or for evil. Finally, we need to see what it looks like when God-given power is used to bless.

Power Is Derivative

Two passages of Scripture will guide our understanding of a godly use of power. In Matthew 28:18–19, Jesus says, “*All authority, all power is given to me; therefore go . . .*”² Jesus holds all authority. That means any little bit of power you and I have is derivative; we are dispatched *under* his authority. Jesus does not give authority to us; he retains it. He is sending us out *under* his authority to carry out *his* enterprises in *his* way. Every drop of power you and I hold is shared power, given to us by the One who holds it all. It is not ours. It is his. He has shared what is rightfully his with us.

Are you verbally powerful? The Word gave you that power. Are you physically powerful? The mighty God, who breaks down strongholds and sustains the universe, gave you that power. Do you have a powerful position? It is from the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Do you have power of knowledge or skill? The Creator God, whose ways are beyond finding out, gave that power to you. Do you hold emotional power with others? That power came from the Comforter, the Wonderful Counselor. Do you have great financial power? If so, it is merely a small portion from the One who holds all riches. Any power that you and I hold is God’s and has been given to us

by him for the sole purpose of glorifying him and blessing others. If all power is derivative, then Christians should hold it with great humility. We are creatures, no more and no less. We follow the One who became flesh. Jesus models for us the humility of power.

In the second passage, we see that while Jesus was on earth, he said, “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19 NIV). The state of heart manifested by the Son of the Father should abound in those of us who follow him. We tout our own teachings, our own writings, our own organizations, and our own reputations. But Jesus did nothing of the sort. We seek a share of the glory and the power for ourselves. He humbled himself before both God and humans and became a servant. We seek to build our own little kingdoms. He came to build the Father’s kingdom. God gives power to us as his creatures to be held in trust. Its purpose is to bless. If we understand the nature of power, both its source and its dangers, we will walk humbly before others, for our Master has said that if we would be chief, if we would lead and impact others, then we must serve. Before telling his disciples that he was sending them, Jesus said, “Look at my hands. Look at my feet” (Luke 24:39 NLT). These are the marks of his humility, the insignia of his authority, the visible evidence that he came to serve, not to be served. Those who follow him, endowed with his power, are called to go the way of the cross.

Power Comes from Our Hearts

Godly power starts in the kingdom of our hearts, is expressed in the flesh, and then moves out into the world. We make the mistake of seeing power as an external force. But power is *not* about having rule over a church, or a parishioner, or an institution, or a country. It’s internal, not external. God’s kingdom

is the kingdom of the heart, not the kingdom of our churches, institutions, missions, or schools. God is building his kingdom, not ours, and he does that by exercising authority over the human heart to the extent that it is filled with the Spirit of Christ. *That* is godly power. And when we are full of God's power internally, we bring life and light and grace and truth and love into all our external enterprises, both great and small. God's kingdom grows, and he is glorified.

Any time we use power to damage or use a person in a way that dishonors God, we fail in our handling of the gift he has given. Any time we use power to feed or elevate ourselves, we fail in our care of the gift. Our power is to be governed by the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Any use that is not subject to the Word of God is a wrong use. Any use of power that is based on self-deception, when we have told ourselves that what God calls evil is instead good, is a wrong use. Remember, Adam and Eve, made in God's likeness, sought to be like him by eating what he had forbidden. The exercise of power in the choice to "be like" God required disobedience to God. It was therefore a wrong use of power. The exercise of the power of position to drive ministry workers into the ground "for the sake of the gospel" is also a wrong use of power. Using emotional and verbal power to achieve our own glory when God says he will share his glory with no one is a wrong use of power. The power of success or financial knowledge used to achieve ministry ends without integrity is a wrong use of power. Using theological knowledge to manipulate people to achieve our own ends is a wrong use of power. Exploiting our position in the home or the church to get our own way, serve our own ends, crush others, silence them, and frighten them is a wrong use of power. Using our influence or our reputation to get others to further our own ends is a wrong use of power.

Withholding power in the face of sin, abuse, and tyranny is also a wrong use of power. It is sin against God—complicity

with the evil he hates. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whatever you *did not do* for one of the least of these, you *did not do* for me” (Matt. 25:45 NIV). Silence in the face of such evil can be a kind of abuse of power, for in staying silent about someone else’s pain, we have nullified our God-given power to speak truth. God asks us to use our verbal power and to open our mouths for the mute, for those without such power. Complicity is a strangling of our God-given power meant to be active in this world on his behalf.

Godly power is derivative; it comes from a source outside us. It is *always* used under God’s authority and in likeness to his character. It is *always* exercised in humility, in love to God. We use it first as his servants and then, like him, as servants to others. It is *always* used for the end goal of bringing glory to God. God is pleased with his Son. That means our uses of power must look like Christ because he is the One who brings God glory. So how will we serve? Here are three true stories that taught me lasting lessons about the beauty of power rightly used.

The first story takes place in a tiny fishing village in Brazil. A pastor there told me that *all*, not some, of the men in his village were alcoholics, batterers, and incestuous. “There are no exceptions, Diane—not the police, not the judge, and not the pastors.” He asked me how he could help his people. I was initially speechless; his situation felt utterly hopeless. How does one shine light in such a place? And then I knew. I was standing with a man who carried the light of our God within. “I know it is overwhelming and feels hopeless,” I responded, “but God put you here because you know him, and no one in this village has ever seen a life like yours with your family. They do not even know there is another way. Walk with Christ, honor your wife, bless your children, and God will illuminate his ways through you and awaken hunger in others for the way that you live.” I didn’t want to suggest in any way that the work God had put

before him would be easy. Hoping to encourage him, I continued, “The task will be hard, sacrificial, and very slow, but there is hope. It is not in you. That hope is Christ in you in this dark place. By the power of God in your life, you can demonstrate, in the flesh, the life of a man who does not abuse power. As you drink deeply of Christ, from you will flow his living water, which will eventually change the landscape of the town.”

The second story involves a conference for Arab women where we discussed trauma and its effects. Many of these women were victims of abusive power. At the end of my talk was a time for questions. One woman said this: “I was brought up in a Christian home. My father beat my mother and all his children horribly. Now I am married and have children. When we go to visit my parents and the children do something he does not like, my father beats them horribly. My husband and I do not believe that is of God, and we do not treat our children like that. Can you tell me what to do?”

Now, I am extremely cautious when I travel about sharing any negative thoughts I have regarding norms and practices in another culture. Even when asked direct questions, I’m careful in my responses. I asked this woman to give me a minute to think, because I knew if I spoke truth, it could result in violence against her. She and her family might be thrown out and disowned. I also knew that if I said nothing, I would encourage her to be complicit in the evil being done to her children—and she was clearly already convicted by God. And if I was silent, I would be complicit as well. So I paused momentarily to pray, and then I told her that I knew what I was about to say was difficult and potentially threatening to her. I agreed that her father was doing harm to her children, and it was not God’s way. To speak truth to him, respectfully, was to use her power to bring God’s light into the room, inviting her father to step into that light. To be silent was to teach her children that his behavior was right, rather than ungodly, and to model silence in

the face of wrongdoing. It also meant being complicit in their harm. The room was very quiet. She was silent for a bit. Then she raised her head and said, “I will do what is right before God on one condition. I only ask that the women in this room commit to pray for me.” They understood the monumental step she was taking and let her know they would be praying. I continue to do so.

The third story involves a man of great power. Some years ago, our son worked in the Middle East for a prince, a member of the royal household. My husband and I were invited as the prince’s guests to see our son and visit the country.

We traveled on a fancy airline, with fancy seats and fancy food. Our son met us at the airport and whisked us away to the palace to meet the prince. I, a woman, would be walking into a room full of Arab men. I went over protocol carefully with our son. He instructed us to wait at the door to be greeted and not to speak first. The prince would remain seated. “Do not offer your hand,” he said. “Do not sit until directed, and sit where you are told.” To my son’s knowledge, no other female had been in that room. He spent almost every evening there, so he knew.

We arrived and were escorted into the palace and taken to the meeting place. The room contained about fifteen Arab men in full regalia. My husband and I waited at the entrance. When instructed, we walked in. No sooner had we done so than the prince stood, walked quickly over to us, and warmly extended his hand to me. He greeted me by name, introduced himself by his first name, and showed me to the seat at his right hand. All fifteen men followed his example. They did what their prince did. We were greatly honored and graciously welcomed.

This man would have been well within his rights to follow protocol. In fact, he risked criticism and the loss of respect for breaking the social rules. But he chose to gather up his power and use it to pour out blessing—which is what he continued to do the entire time we were there. He illustrates what a person

of much power looks like when they do not clutch glory but rather seek to use that power to bless others.

These stories help us imagine how God would have us exercise our power. I believe that God would have us use our power as benediction, to bless, by way of sacrifice, by way of the cross.

The Brazilian pastor living sacrificially in that seacoast town—one man, one family, full of the light of the love of Christ, illuminating a very dark world—embodies in his life what Jesus did in his own life. The King of Kings became one man, finite, living in time and place. He was full of light and love, ministering one by one and always faithful to the Father.

The lovely Arab woman living sacrificially—bringing light and love by speaking truth to power, refusing complicity with evil done in the name of God—blesses her father with a firm but respectful invitation to the light. She blesses her children, for they will see and know a new way and come to understand that culture, even so-called Christian culture, often fails to follow Christ. She will look like Jesus, who spoke truth to the religious leaders and confronted those who crushed the little ones.

And the gracious sheikh who, for love of our son, blessed my husband and me—stepping across all those divides that protect his name and status, inviting us to sit at his right hand and be waited on and receive honor from the one we came to honor—gave us a small but rich taste of the Lord of heaven and earth seated on the throne. This earthly prince, who inspired awe in me by crossing over position, tradition, culture, gender, and training to greet me with his right hand, reminds me of the awe due to my true Lord, who at a cost beyond measure crosses over the barriers of highest position and of sin and death to welcome me at the right hand of the Father.

It is my prayer, as we think together about the power bestowed on us by God, that we will let his light shine in as we study and listen well. May we, his children, see clearly the truth about earthly power and not be seduced. May we not deceive

ourselves or others regarding any use of power that is not under the authority of the One who holds all power. May we live in dark places, shining the light of Christ on the abuses around us, even when they are in our own circles. May we speak to those who are crushing God's little ones or robbing the people in his churches. And may we, like our Lord, lay aside every bit of earthly power to cross divides, step out of high positions, and reach out with love to those who are vulnerable, whose power is little or trampled, bestowing benedictions as we go.