

# The Power Abusers

When follow-the-leader becomes a dangerous game

RONALD M. ENROTH

*With fast  
winks, Paul J. Enroth*

■ "She usually tape-recorded all the telephone calls made to the so-called outside world. We gave her this privilege because she was our leader and she was protecting us," said a former member of the New York-based New Testament Missionary Fellowship, headed by Hannah Lowe, an octogenarian now in South America. ■

■ "We were forced to sign vows that any children we had would become the property of the commune and that if we ever left, they would get the children," reports a former member of Faith Tabernacle in southern California, led by Mrs. Eleanor Davies. This bizarre group, reflecting fundamentalist, charismatic, and communal elements, has been accused of unbelievable methods of control of its members—elaborate spying, public humiliations, physical and mental torture, and the manipulation of marriages. ■

■ "The oracle of God on earth today," according to The Local Church movement, is Witness Lee, an aberrant disciple of the well-known Chinese Bible teacher Watchman Nee. Lee's Local Church congregations use fear and intimidation to control their members, according to Max Rapoport, a former heir-apparent to the leadership. "Practically all the people I've seen who have left... live in morbid fear that something will happen to them." ■

Each of these examples would be called "evangelical" by the press and each have members in their ranks that follow Christ and the Bible with a dedication that matches the more traditional congregations. Many of the people in these groups are graduates of recognized Christian colleges; a few are graduates or former students of recognized evangelical seminaries.

These groups, like many others, have organized a disciplined, highly loyal band of professing Christians around a powerful leader. Like the People's Temple of Jim Jones, most of these groups are little known outside their locale. But the growing number of these semi-cultic authoritarian groups, with their uneasy proximity to evangelical ideas and practice, signals a new

concern for authoritarianism in American church life.

Throughout history, people have repeatedly used and abused religious or spiritual authority to further their own selfish ends. Elmer Gantry types such as Marjoe Gortner and Rev. Ike are good examples. This tendency can also be seen in the current proliferation of self-awareness and consciousness movements which psychologist Paul Vitz correctly terms "the cult of self-worship" and which social critic Christopher Lasch feels are an indicator of the "culture of narcissism." The exploitation of religious/spiritual activity by self-seeking individuals is more dramatically and more destructively evidenced in the recent upsurge of extremist cults, including the widely publicized People's Temple. The leaders of such groups may very well be driven by a sincere belief that their teachings contain the solution to the world's problems. Aspiring cult leaders are undoubtedly influenced by the financial

rewards that abound in the messiah business today. More significant, however, is the motivation based on the desire to control others, to exercise power over people.

While this desire to influence and control people is characteristic of cultic leadership, it is by no means restricted to such extreme expressions. Various forms of charisma control and authoritarianism can be seen in more conventional religious circles, including evangelicalism and its fringe elements. Even closer to home, we would probably agree that fascination with power and the temptation of power is a very common human experience. We may exercise power at home as parent or spouse, or we may seek to increase our power and position at work.

Respected Christian writer Paul Tournier acknowledges that physicians (like himself) have chosen "a vocation of power." The doctor's knowledge and technical skill often place him on a pedestal which accentuates the depen-

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dence of the patient and gives a flattering sense of superiority. "To be looked upon as a savior leaves none of us indifferent."

Tournier makes the same observation regarding others in the helping professions—social workers, psychologists, ministers—all need to be aware of the temptation of power, the temptation to control, manipulate, even exploit those who come seeking help. To assist people who are experiencing distress and confusion is to play an ego-satisfying and powerful role. It inevitably involves an element of domination and a desire, perhaps not consciously recognized, to increase one's own power. As Tournier concludes, "...there is in us, especially in those whose intentions are of the purest, an excessive and destructive will to power which eludes even the most sincere and honest self-examination."

Whether it is a physician, pastor, or new-age prophet on the pedestal, chances are the public is largely responsible for putting him or her there. What is it about people, including evangelicals, that explains this apparent need for authority figures? There are obviously many individuals in our society who are looking for some kind of authority to co-sign for their lives. As David Gill noted in *Radix* magazine, "We want heroes! We want reassurance that someone knows what is going on in this mad world. We want a father or a mother to lean on. We want revolutionary folk heroes who will tell us what to do until the rapture. We massage the egos of these demagogues and canonize their every opinion. We accept without a whimper their rationalizations of their errors and deviations."

The popularity of evangelical gurus, new-age cults, and superpastors says a number of things about our society as well as rank-and-file evangelicalism. First, there are many people in our rapidly changing and often confusing world who have real dependency needs. They are attracted to authoritarian movements, Christian or otherwise, because these movements offer black and white, clear-cut answers (or systematized approaches) to life's problems. Moreover, the leaders of such organi-

zations convey a sense of solidity, a feeling of being on top of problems, of being in control of the situation. In a word, these groups offer security. For people who have lacked positive structure in their lives, who have difficulty in making decisions or resolving conflicts or who are just plain uncertain about the future, these movements/churches/programs are a haven.

The leaders of many of these groups consciously foster an unhealthy form of dependency, spiritually and otherwise, by focusing on themes of submission and obedience to those in authority. They create the impression that people just aren't going to find their way through life's maze without a lot of firm directives from those at the top. "Apostle" John Robert Stevens, founder and leader of an aberrant Christian group known as The Church of the Living Word (or "The Walk") puts it succinctly: "People are not going to make it unless they have a man like Moses to intercede for them."

Secondly, an obvious need in today's society and today's church is a sense of belonging and an experience of community. Our highly mobile, disjointed world creates a strong demand for fellowship. Some people find their need for communion met in conventional contexts such as church support groups, fraternal organizations, and friendship cliques. Others found it, or hoped they would find it, in Jonestown. As Norman De Puy observed, "The people in Guyana did not abandon their self-control, their judgment or their competitive instincts so much as they traded them off for love, peace, community, and security."

Another characteristic of the current scene is a genuine spiritual hunger with many new Christians lacking firm roots. People who get into cults are involved in a spiritual search not unlike those who find Christ at a Billy Graham crusade or through the ministry of Christian broadcasting. In both cases, we are talking about people who are theologically naive and unsophisticated. Newly converted Christians are usually not in a position to evaluate the spiritual smorgasbord which is available to them. It is understandable that many heed a strongly authoritarian ap-

peal under such circumstances. British church leader Michael Harper suggests that the recent extraordinary growth of the charismatic renewal movement in North America is related to the confusion and controversy surrounding the highly authoritarian, "shepherding" and "discipling" emphasis in certain charismatic circles. "The renewal has produced thousands of nomadic Christians, or sheep without shepherds, and there has been little thought for order and authority. Many have chosen spiritual anarchy, and the casualties have been numerous."

The so-called shepherding movement exemplifies how well-intentioned Christian leaders can bring disunity to the body of Christ and unanticipated bondage to individual believers. It is a demonstration of how a perfectly biblical concept like authority can go awry. At the heart of the shepherding-discipleship-submission controversy is the idea of "delegated authority" or "spiritual authority" as it is exercised by a "personal shepherd." In their critique of the discipleship movement, Kennedy and Lewis state, "A person who is a 'delegated authority' is one who has been appointed to give personal direction and care to Christians placed under him. This person has the responsibility of overseeing and directing the lives of these individuals as they request his direction."

When a "delegated authority" provides counsel to those under him, he speaks with God's authority. As Derek Prince, a leader in the discipleship movement, puts it: "Whenever his [God's] delegated authority touches our lives, he requires us to acknowledge and submit to it, just as we would to him in person." Or, as John Robert Stevens of "The Walk" describes it, "If the authority over you is submissive to God, then you are to be submissive to him with your very life."

A practice common to both cultic and certain Christian groups is to seek to control the private lives of followers. Christians need to beware of those leaders who claim a "direct word from the Lord" concerning a particular person's finances, family matters, or major decisions such as the choice of a life partner or a career. Bible scholars point

out that the New Testament concept of authority as expressed in the Greek word *exousia* does not have the connotation of jurisdiction over the lives of others. Rather, it is the authority of truth, the authority of wisdom and experience which can be evidenced in a leader who is held up as a special example, who can commend himself "to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (II Cor. 4:2).

Two of the classic hallmarks of authoritarianism are blind loyalty and unquestioning obedience. Kennedy and Lewis remind us that "blind trust in any human authority, be it in a pastor, or in a group of elders, or even in an apostolic authority of the status of Paul is never called for in Scripture. The loyalty we are called to is first and foremost loyalty to the received Word of God. The loyalty we have to one another as Christians is not blind loyalty... nor is it an unthinking loyalty."

Christ should be our model Shepherd. In the Bible he is called the Chief Shepherd. His is an example of servanthood. Peter exhorts Christian leaders to imitate the supreme role model when he writes, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (I Pet. 5:2,3). The good shepherd leads but does not control.

One of the major figures in the shepherding movement is the Argentinian, Juan Carlos Ortiz. In his influential book, *Call to Discipleship*, he speaks of the need to "control your disciples." He describes a disciple as "one who obeys commands." Critics of such a view contend that only God has the right to command people. David Breese makes the point that only Jesus Christ deserves disciples. The book of Acts warns of those who will come seeking followers: "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

Paul Tournier in *The Violence Within* recognizes this "will to power" which all too often is present in a religious movement. He warns of the dangers of having much influence and spiritual authority. "They look upon us as ex-

## Leaders vs. Gurus

Every growing Christian discovers a series of teachers, leaders, and models that help him in his spiritual walk. A glance at your book shelf may turn up a cluster of books by Christian writers or leaders who had your undivided attention for a period of time; then you moved on to others, the contribution of the first digested and an attachment to a new thinker begun. Likewise the leadership of a pastor or Bible teacher will sometimes be powerfully effective and tenacious.

How do you distinguish these influences on your life from the demanding near-cultic, negative leadership like that described in the accompanying article?

Competent, Christian leaders and thinkers exert an influence that is more moral and spiritual than physical or psychological. In contrast, the religious autocrat takes pleasure in requiring obedience and subordination. His style of leadership can be described as narcissistic. His message is so intertwined with his own personality (and his fear of being weak) that he easily concludes that anyone who disagrees with him—who is not loyal to him—is in consort with the Adversary.

Another way of approaching the

problem is to recognize that leadership depends on followership, and that ideally means cooperation with the leader rather than domination and control by the leader. The source of legitimate Christian leadership therefore lies in *entrusted authority*. As Professor J. W. Getzels has noted, "Authority is entrusted in a leader when power resides in the individual themselves, and cooperation is granted the leader by the follower in virtue of the competence he is judged to have. Judgment the follower, who may himself become a leader can alter."

The narcissistic autocrat, the evangelical guru, attempts to compel subordination; the true Christian leader can legitimately only elicit followership.

Christians in leadership must strive to exemplify the qualities of our Lord Jesus Christ, "that great Shepherd of the sheep." Christians in followership roles must acknowledge the biblical admonition: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Heb. 13:17). Such a relationship of dynamic mutuality can allow God to "work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever" (Heb. 13:21).

—R. M.

perts, God's mouthpieces, the interpreters of his will—to begin with for ourselves but very soon, before we realize it, for other people too, especially since they insist on requiring it of us. Very soon, too, we find ourselves thinking that when they follow our advice they are obeying God and that when they resist us they are really resisting God."

Note Tournier's observation that the people "insist on requiring it of us." The disquieting truth is that the Christian public cultivates charisma control and sets the stage for authoritarianism. Christians unconsciously invite demagogues. They demand hierarchical patterns rather than collegial forms; they see chain-of-command structures as the only biblical option. They desperately want apostles.

Members of the aberrant Christian

group, The Church of the Living Word, are stuck with apostles whether they like it or not. Their apostle, Robert Stevens, who left Pentecost fundamentalism years ago to start his own version of "the Lord's Remnant," tells his congregations, "You'll be taught by the Spirit what is involved in... apostleship or you'll be left in Babylon. There's no halfway point. The only alternative you have is spiritual submission and to divine order is Babylon."

How does one recognize an apostle in Steven's group? By some vaguely defined form of "revelation." "I don't teach people this. Jesus did go around saying, 'I'm the Messiah.' A person who has an ear to hear and an eye to see and a spiritual hunger to reach into God, when hearing an apostle will know he is an apostle."

What are some of the results of the preoccupation with power and authority in so many segments of fundamentalism and evangelicalism today? As was noted earlier, the "discipleship earthquake," as Michael Harper described it, was the most disruptive controversy to hit the charismatic renewal movement in its short history. The issue caused angry exchanges in which charismatics publicly denounced each other. In March 1976, various leaders of the charismatic movement met in Oklahoma City in an effort to achieve reconciliation and healing. Leaders of Christian Growth Ministries of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, who were the focus of much of the controversy, issued a formal statement to the conference indicating their regret for the problems that had arisen and asking "forgiveness from our fellow believers whom we have offended."

The touchy issues of authority and submission are far from being fully resolved in evangelical circles, however. A well-known charismatic American Baptist church in Chula Vista, California, for example, continues in a swirl of controversy over the alleged authoritarianism of its leadership, especially the pastor, Ken Pagard. The church, many of whose members live in communal households, has also been criticized for certain aspects of its "inner healing" ministry. Some ex-members have claimed that spanking of unsubmitive wives was not unknown and that any criticism of the pastor (occasionally referred to as "our apostle") and elders was interpreted as a "spirit of rebellion" and hence, the work of Satan. Many have left the communal lifestyle claiming that heads of households are "on a power trip." One disgruntled former member commented, "They will not let people mature; they want to keep people dependent on the head of household." Others have left because of the strain on their marriages resulting from group pressures.

It has been suggested that a system of checks and balances is needed to prevent the abuse of authority by Christians in leadership. Some of the very individuals who have been accused of being authoritarian already claim to be

operating under such a system. Upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that those who "check" and "balance" come from the same narrowly defined circle of like-minded acquaintances or "fellowships." No truly external system of checks and balances is functioning—or perhaps welcome.

Another related result of an authoritarian orientation is the stifling of questioning and internal criticism. A powerful leader is wary of scrutiny and threatened by anyone who "makes waves." In Christian and pseudo-Christian groups which emphasize a strong central leader, dissent is discouraged and defined as un-Christian. In response to some internal murmuring, Apostle Stevens of "The Walk" advised, "This is certainly not a day for throwing rocks. Anyone who feels qualified to throw a rock at someone should be rebuked for his self-righteousness."

In strongly authoritarian movements or churches, those who persist in raising uncomfortable questions, especially after they have left the group, are labeled "reprobates" or worse yet, "agents of Satan." The weak and the meek who have legitimate concerns and questions do not dare to share those reservations, sometimes because of group pressure, sometimes because they have been subjected to control mechanisms of fear, guilt, and spiritual intimidation.

A preoccupation with Satan and his work is another characteristic of spiritually authoritarian groups. Members of The Church of the Living Word are led to believe that Satan is concentrating his efforts against that group. "Satan hits at our acceptance of the authority that has been committed to us... because that is the only thing that is going to upset his plan." Authoritarian leaders are often paranoid and typically respond to criticism by telling their followers that this kind of "persecution" is only further evidence that Satan is attempting to sabotage God's work.

Finally, authoritarian movements are often anti-intellectual and inhibit the exposure of members to alternative (and often competing) ideological and/or spiritual systems. Followers of evangelical gurus consciously limit their

reading and study to the publications and/or tapes of their favorite teachers. An acquaintance of mine was in the study of a minister who is a disciple of Robert Thieme, Houston, Texas. The guest observed that there were less than a dozen books on the pastor's book shelf. The pastor commented, "I have replaced the books in my library with the tapes of Robert Thieme." He claimed to spend upwards of forty hours a week "studying" the tapes.

In the face of increasing dependence on strong leadership in Christian circles, evangelicals who value their spiritual autonomy yet recognize the legitimate role of biblical submission and headship, must reaffirm the freedom which characterizes the new life in Christ. We must resist any teaching that brings into question Christ's role as the sole mediator (go-between) between God and man. We must reassert that no Christian is ever called upon to give unquestioning obedience to anyone. We ultimately must accept only the lordship of Christ.

In our homes, in our churches, in our programs of Christian education,

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we must cultivate critical, discerning minds. As David Gill has written, "No one is completely right all the time, not Jacques Ellul, not Bill Gothard, not Billy Graham, not *Sojourners* magazine, not Elisabeth Elliot.... Not only should we recognize this ourselves, we should not permit any of these people (or others) to be unaware of their fallibility. They need our criticism." We all need to be like the diligent Bereans who "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).