

Seven Steps to Avoid the Abuse of Power

By:
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Time after time churches and ministries experience unforeseen disaster from the inside out because no one pays attention to the enemy within their gates. Well meaning yet uninformed congregants and church boards place highly skilled and educated individuals into positions of authority. New recruits are given great responsibility over people, finances and job tasks. Credentials are examined, applications are read, resources are checked but maturity is not discussed. “So tell me about your maturity? What is your earned maturity? Where do you fall on the Maturity Indicators Chart? How do you intend to instill maturity into our church or ministry?” These questions go unanswered because they are never asked. Questions such as these, when asked, prevent disasters of an unprecedented caliber. These questions preserve you and your people. One of the disasters a review of maturity prevents is the abuse of power. The abuse and misuse of power comes in the form of spiritual abuse, sexual exploitation, embezzlement, fraud, lying, greed, cheating, stealing, fear based decisions, intimidation and many more. All of these deadly behaviors are effortlessly recognizable and preventable when maturity is brought into the limelight. Maturity gives us a lens to examine our ministries, churches, congregants and families so we know our limitations. Maturity means we know what to expect from one another and, more importantly, ourselves. Maturity is the solution you haven’t thought of before for you and your people.

1. *Remember the Titanic* - Assess Maturity in your ministry and church leadership.

What we see is not always what we get. The iceberg that tore open and sank the Titanic was partially visible while the bulk of it lay hidden beneath the water’s surface. The ship described as indestructible did not stand a chance against the icy mass. Recognition was too late. The same holds true in terms of maturity when it lacks. It’s not just what we see but what remains hidden that leaves churches vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Unfinished growth tasks, unaddressed wounding and gaping holes in one’s developmental process leaves trouble lurking beneath the surface of individuals who are entrusted with great responsibility and authority. Sadly, in many cases, like the Titanic, recognition is too late before irreversible damage erupts in our congregations and ministries. We are left to ask questions such as, “What happened? How could he/she do this? What were they thinking?”

When we assess the maturity of our leadership, staff and board members we keep the spotlight on the iceberg – the potential for disaster. The lack of maturity shows up not in the good times, but in the bad – when you need to count on it, it’s not there. We all know the parable of the ten virgins and the lamp oil. Five were prepared while the other five were unprepared. We all know the outcome. Likewise, we stay prepared and gain solid, unwavering maturity from life training and fellowship with others. As we receive life from people who are ‘upstream’ from us in age and experience, we develop deep roots to

keep us firmly planted and secure. For this reason the ‘Timothys’ out there rely on the ‘Pauls’ to show them how to be strong in the Lord. The ‘Moses’ in church demonstrate to the young ‘Joshuas’ how to stay relational amidst upsetting circumstances. People show us what is life giving and what is deadly, not just with words but actions. When we lack indispensable examples who are up the road from us we wither and develop unhelpful coping mechanisms that leave us striving rather than thriving. We require a community to help us recognize, address and receive all we need to be equipped to avoid disaster.

2. Address Type A and Type B Traumas in Church Leadership and those in authority.

We lose our natural progression of growth when bad things happen or we lack essential nutrients to thrive. Two types of trauma strongly influence our social and private areas of life causing enormous costs in time, emotions, damaged relationships and lost productivity. One (Type B) is usually kept a secret even though the results are visible while the second kind (Type A) is often unknown by the person. Both are deadly. Type A traumas come from the *absence* of necessary good things we should all receive, things that gives us emotional stability. These absences create difficulties in relationships.¹ Type B trauma, on the other hand, comes from bad things such as physical and sexual abuse, natural disasters, combat and war related exposure and so on.² Trauma and its results - noticed or not, saturate our schools, churches and neighborhoods - even touching the homes of leaders.

One of the greatest problems of being on the receiving end of trauma and/or deadly/lifeless relationships is the fact that we are left stunted and emotionally bruised. Our active process of growth ceases. We are left to run on fumes and go through the motions of life rather than being fully alive with earned maturity. This agonizing gap in development often goes undetected and is overlooked.

3. *Not even God can sink it.* Purposefully work on recovery while keeping the attention on the problems and potential for disaster.

One day while being interviewed, the builder of the Titanic told reporters when asked about the ship’s durability, “Not even God can sink it”. Believing our churches or ministries are above disaster sets us up for failure. Not having a language or understanding of maturity leaves us vulnerable for unanticipated tragedy. Like the Titanic, disaster not only hurts the ship but the people who rely on the ship for safety and life. When we discover deficits and wounds in our midst we must persistently address them. This is recovery. We examine ourselves and the people around us. Where do we fall short on the Maturity Chart? How do we contribute to the problem in our leadership when we discover there are absences? How can we encourage growth and promote life giving changes in our church situation?

¹ The Life Model, Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You. Page 42

² The Life Model, Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You. Page 44

A large part of being who we are created to be in Jesus Christ both individually and corporately is the need to mature. We cannot escape the consequences of Adam and Eve's fall but we can learn how to grow, recover and prosper with grace, style and poise when life produces pain and adversity. Scripture admonishes us to be fully alive, created to be sources of life to those around us. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:10 that we are designed by God in Jesus Christ to express our Master Designer in the form of 'good works'. Good works are not a means to an end, rather the expression of our Creator through our words, actions, relationships and presence. The Body of Christ finds herself in trouble when she tries to convey the Creator in her own strength, abilities and creativity apart from her Designer. When separated and disconnected from the Author of Life we become stagnant, like a cesspool of stale water unable to sustain life. At this point kindred fellowship absorbs and deprives life, rather than refresh and satisfy others with her presence from the Living Waters of Jesus the Christ. Addressing deficits means we come alive in new ways.

4. Address fear bonds in church structure and curb behavior that enables leaders to go unchecked.

Fear hinders and impedes our ability to reason, think clearly and make wise decisions. When leaders and congregants operate on fear, intimidation and threat the environment changes from one that promotes life to one that hinders life. Individuals begin to people-please, avoid and placate all in the name of appeasing. To step out of fear and into desire we must examine ways fear bonds run the show in our ministries and churches. Take active steps to promote love bonds according to the Life Model so the environment can be one of safety, accountability and transparency for leadership and congregants.

5. Watch for icebergs! Use difficulties and trials as a litmus test to see how maturity holds up in leadership.

Distress tests our maturity. True maturity shows itself during the turbulent times of life, not the calm. In relationships, fellowship and ministry the occasion arises when trials and tribulations of all sorts occur. During and after hardship, review and debrief how staff and leadership is doing. Are their signs and indicators showing decisions are based on fear? Are people trying to control or intimidate? Are people returning to joy from upset? Are hidden addictions surfacing? These are just a few questions to ask when hardship hits you and your people.

6. Create an environment that promotes life - where leaders and congregants have accountability with team members who understand maturity.

Once you develop an atmosphere where leaders, boards and congregants have the common language of maturity disasters can be prevented and addressed head on. Because maturity is not about value, rather the betterment of life, we can openly discuss needs and tasks to be finished without shame, guilt or condemnation. Find people who can help you advance in your maturity. These are people who have something you need. One of the advantages of hosting a weekend Maturity Retreat is it helps you and your

church identify earned maturity. Once maturity is identified the next step is to discover who the people are that will assist you moving ahead.

7. Be complete and address the Biblical concept of maturity today!

We read in Genesis 25:27, *So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents.* (NKVJ) Being a ‘hunter’ in Scripture is not a godly trait, considering Nimrod also was a hunter ‘against the Lord’.³ Hebrews tells us Esau was a fornicator and one brief examination of his life tells us he was unstable, fleshly, restless and interested in satisfying his immediate cravings and lusts.⁴ Jacob, on the other hand, is described as being ‘mild’. The Hebrew word for mild, *tam* means complete, finished, sound or whole, to name a few.⁵ Tam, an adjectival form has a verb that is used in 1 Kings 6:22 to describe the ‘finishing’ of the temple when there was nothing else to add. Some scholars associate tam’s reference to Jacob as descriptive of his maturity. If so, we see a clear picture of what happens when we have maturity versus when we lack. Maturity does not mean we are perfect in the sense of never committing error or sin. Nor does maturity mean we have added value. Rather, maturity refers to being complete in terms of our life stages and accomplished tasks. Children become adults not only because their bodies develop but for the reason they *earn their stripes*, so to speak. Children must complete specific tasks that enable them to emotionally grow and develop. Explicit traits and behaviors differentiate adults from children. Clearly we recognize an absence when we observe individuals in adult bodies acting like children. Outbursts, rigidity, fearful motivations and addictions are just a few characteristics to look for. Learning to use power in a life giving way is one characteristic of solid adult maturity. Those who fail to use power effectively have not completed adult maturity.

One basic childhood task of maturing is learning what satisfies. When people learn what brings personal satisfaction, they no longer have to invest all their time and energy eating, drinking, smoking, buying and consuming. From experience adults know what is good for them and what is not and their behavior, choices and witness testify to this reality. However, the painful failure to learn satisfaction comes awfully close to Esau who was unstable, restless, ‘fleshly’ and devoid of consistency. Among other absences, the lack of maturity causes individuals to act like a different person according to circumstances, environment and people. A ‘dismembered identity’ develops and we no longer live according to our heart. Our experience fails to match our theology, beliefs and commitments, so we keep the two separate. What we believe and what we do detach so who we are at church is different than who we are at home, work or school. Being the same person over time and in all emotions is another clear indicator of maturity and stability. These are just a few characteristics to look in order to identify those who are vulnerable to abuse power.

³ First Fruits of Zion Parasha Toledot, Volume 1 points out this interpretation and the negative connotation associated with being a ‘hunter’ both for Nimrod and Esau

⁴ Hebrews 12:16

⁵ OT:8535 tam (tawm); from OT:8552; complete; usually (morally) pious; specifically, gentle, dear:

KJV - coupled together, perfect, plain, undefiled, upright. (Biblesoft’s New Exhaustive Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright © 1994, 2003 Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc.)