
**ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF ABUSES OF POWER IN CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP—A CASE STUDY OF “KINGLY POWER” IN
THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH**

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Problem and Purpose

Power is an integral aspect of all types of leadership. The term “abuse of power” describes an inappropriate and corrupt application of power. The exercise of power becomes an abuse of power when a person in a position of power acts in a manner that cannot be justified in terms of truth or morality (goodness, kindness, justice, or obedience). While abuses of power have always been a part of Christian leadership, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership, no scholarly study on the moral dimensions of abuses of power in the Adventist Church has been done. Although such abuses are well known, without an ethical analysis of these experiences important lessons of how Christian leaders might deal with the corruptive nature of power cannot be learned. An analysis of the misuse of power is a necessary first step to learn how to avoid the traps of power abuse and to find possible solutions for enhancing Christian leadership.

Methodology

The ethical analysis in this study concentrates on only a single aspect of leadership—the misuse of power. Since it is universally accepted that the abuse of power is a deviation from true Christian leadership and morally inappropriate, the ethical analysis did not include typical moral dilemmas, such as discerning between good and bad, or right and wrong. Instead, the analysis in this study searched for the causes of the abuses of power.

As a case study, this study investigates the well-known “kingly power” incident in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and analyzes the leadership of two prominent leaders involved in the controversy: John Harvey Kellogg, leader of the medical branch of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, leader of the ministerial branch and president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Based on its causes, this research categorizes the abuse of power in the following seven groups: abuses related to misuse of authority, to mistreatment of subordinates, to preservation of power, to misconduct of a leader, to corrupted character traits, to ignoring Christian principles, and to misplaced responsibility, authenticity, and presence.

Conclusions

The analysis of the abuses of power is followed by some proposed measures for their prevention. This prevention starts with the awareness that spiritual leaders are servants of God who are in service to His people. It requires transparency and well-defined and limited mandate of the leader. Additionally, subordinates and leaders are supposed to act as checks and balances for each other. Leaders must be reminded that they are not irreplaceable. Practical solutions for the problem would include limiting a leader's time in office, mandating changes or rotations in the leadership position, clearly defining the boundaries and limits of a particular position, and educating leaders regarding the extent and limitations of their position. Consequently, sharing responsibility, empowering the whole body of the church, and making decisions through committees have the purpose of shifting power from the hands of the individual to the whole church. The purpose of the election process is to elect a leader with clear principles, one who practices them, and one that has the least amount of vices, since no one is perfect.

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church attempted to deal with the abuses in its leadership by implementing changes in organizational structure, the discrepancy between Christocentric theory and abusive practice proves that abuses of power depend on the personal conduct of the leader and on how much his subordinates allow that leader to exercise such inordinate power. The steps suggested in this study are a simple attempt to propose some potential solutions, with the goal of starting a constructive discussion of practical steps to prevent power abuse.