



Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

by Diane Langberg

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Reviewed by Doug Duncan

Many former members of cultic abuse are fleeing Bible-based, nominally Christian groups. As they struggle to make sense of what has happened to them, despite their negative experiences with narcissistic and controlling leaders, they do not want to let go of their core identity as Christian believers, which was often formed before they were sucked into the abusive or cultic church. They do not believe they have been brainwashed into a wrong set of beliefs. Rather, they think that beliefs that were good and right were misused to coerce and manipulate.

Fortunately, there is a relatively recent book that addresses this dichotomy, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, by Diane Langberg. In *Redeeming Power*, Langberg examines the ways in which people are harmed by unethical leaders and dysfunctional systems in the Christian (and specifically evangelical) Church, and she does it from an evangelical perspective, grounding her basic argument in scripture and reasoning in a way that will appeal to people in that community. Langberg's approach is sophisticated and intelligent. She is a seasoned psychologist (PhD, Temple University), and she has traveled extensively. She has a long history of counseling people with trauma and previously wrote a book entitled *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Her work with victims of sexual abuse brought her into contact with people who had been sexually abused in religious contexts, and she witnessed the ways that churches and religious organizations often prioritized the reputation of the institution over the protection and healing of the victims of abuse, sexual and otherwise, which led her to write *Redeeming Power*.

Langberg begins the book with a section on defining power. Power is an unavoidable component of our experience as human beings and is an aspect of every relationship we have. Even the most vulnerable and helpless among us, such as newborn babies, have the power, by the simple act of crying, to get their parents to forego desperately needed sleep and get up in the middle of the night and feed them. Langberg goes on to describe various types of power, such as physical power, the power of specialized knowledge that may be possessed by a doctor or professor, economic power, and the power of culture. All these types of power can be used to accomplish good things, and all of them can be abused.

In addition to the ubiquitous nature of power, Langberg says that we all carry vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities can be exploited by others who use their power

abusively. Arguing from scripture, Langberg says that our character is revealed when we are faced with another's vulnerability. If our heart is not right, we will misuse our power to exploit another's vulnerability for our own ends, and power misused in this way will be tied to deception, both of self and others. Parenthetically, I will say that Langberg's effort to ground all her arguments in scripture are both a strength and a weakness of this book. It is a strength in terms of how appealing this book will be to evangelicals, the very people she is trying to reach. She is one of them, and she speaks their language. Evangelicals will feel comfortable with her style of reasoning, and they will feel it is safe to expose themselves to it. Others, however, may wonder why she expends so much effort to ground her arguments in scripture when she could make all her points more directly with secular language. She could certainly do so considering her secular education and wide experience, but then she might lose the people she most wants to help.

Another point she makes in the initial section defining power is that our cultures are powerful. She notes that, "As humans, we are easily seduced and shaped by the culture in which we have marinated" (p. 46). This is analogous to what some cult critics might call a thought-reform environment, except for the fact that she thinks of it as a more universal phenomenon. In subtle ways, we are always in something of a thought-reform environment, whether we recognize it or not. She quotes an African American pastor who tells a white pastor, "You white folks don't even know you have a culture. You think your way is simply right and the rest of us have cultures" (p. 46).

Langberg explains that we Christians are part of a sub-culture that is created and maintained by flawed, selfish human beings. We are just as apt as other humans to be self-serving and to speak well but behave poorly. Sometimes our words do not match our deeds. When that happens—especially to people in leadership—we can use deception to cover up abuse in an institution and rationalize it as being for the greater good. Langberg says,

"When we hear scriptural words about building up the church for the glory of God, the work sounds heavenly. But when the building materials are arrogance, coercion, and aggression, the outcome is hideous. How we flesh out our good words matters." (p. 52)

The next section of the book is "Power Abused" in which Langberg takes a deeper dive into different kinds of power and the ways that they can be abused. In particular, she delves into how those with the power of knowledge, intellect, and skill can abuse their power. She cites the case of Larry Nassar, who was the team doctor of the United States women's national gymnastics team. Though he was a skilled physician who was able to help young female gymnasts heal their injuries so they could return to competition, he was also a serial pedophile who used his position to sexually abuse dozens of young women over the course of many years. In a like manner, Langberg describes how this power deriving from knowledge, intellect, and skill can be exercised and abused by spiritual leaders, such as pastors, who are often thought of as speaking for God: "Scripture can be twisted and used out of context to corrupt or control people who assume that the pastor is a trustworthy person" (p. 67).

Langberg goes on to discuss sexual abuse and then tells the story of a young man who was only 16 years old when he was sexually seduced by an associate youth pastor at his evangelical church. She well describes the grooming process and explains how the young man at first blamed himself and was reluctant to report anything to anyone in authority because he feared nobody would believe his word over the associate youth pastor's. Of

course, it eventually transpired that this associate youth pastor was also taking advantage of other young men in the youth group, and he was fired. However, Langberg points out that "...no legal action was taken, no care was offered to the victims, and no public warning was given regarding the predator" (p. 72). In other words, the church swept the whole series of episodes under the rug to protect its own reputation. Even worse, the senior pastor told the young man, "If you want to be faithful, you will be quiet" (p.72).

Next, Langberg examines systems and how they, too, can be abusive. She says, "systemic abuse applies when a system that is designed to serve people is instead destroying them, reducing, harming, wasting, and dehumanizing those created in the image of God" (p. 76). She recounts what has happened in recent years with the Boy Scouts of America, where the leadership and other stakeholders covered up instances of abuse for the sake of protecting the organization, and how those unethical choices ended up being the controlling aspect of the system, contrary to all the stated purposes of the organization. She draws the parallel to how many religious organizations "...have worked to cover up abuse, deny abuse, and protect the offenders. Many have done so to 'protect God's work,' which actually translates into preserving an institution rather than the human beings meant to flourish in it" (p. 78).

Langberg goes on to explore how charismatic leaders take advantage of their positions in these systems and how they are aided by the silence and passivity of those who do not want to disrupt things by telling the truth. She contrasts that with the example of Jesus, who was a truth-teller in the abusive system defined by the Roman occupation of Palestine in the first century of the Common Era. "People," according to Langberg, "are sacred, created in the image of God. Systems are not. They are only worth the people in them, and the people they serve" (p. 87).

The next chapter of the book discusses power between men and women. Langberg is very clear that the Church has often made mistakes in this arena. She tells her own story of how when she was the only woman in her class in her PhD program studying psychology, she was told by many Christian men that she should not be pursuing a graduate degree, but she should rather focus on finding a husband (she was not even dating anyone at the time), getting married, and using her gifts to raise a family (p. 92). Thankfully, she persevered and was able to become a psychologist. Then, she encountered many women in her practice who told her stories of domestic abuse and even marital rape, and she was confronted with how voiceless these women often were. Even Langberg's own male supervisors discounted the stories of these women as being hysterical. Still, by listening to them she learned to appreciate the truth of what they had to say and was forced to wrestle with the ways these women were being failed by their church leaders. She thoughtfully discusses the need for divorce in such circumstances, and how it is often the lesser evil—though, of course, it is sad when comes to that.

Langberg moves to a discussion of "The Intersection of Race and Power" in the next chapter. Of course, evangelicals were central to the abolitionist movement in the 19th century, but that does not mean that the evangelical movement in this country is beyond criticism when it comes to race. Langberg exhorts us to "Look honestly at history. We have participated in the rejection and contempt of others based on race" (p. 109). She talks about how, as a very young girl, she was exposed to the Jim Crow laws in the South of the 1950s, as her family traveled from Virginia to Florida with their African American maid and babysitter. Sadly, many of the people who passively allowed—and in some cases actively perpetuated—the hateful system of segregation in the South of that era were evangelical Christians.

Langberg discusses the “tragic suffering and evil that result when humans are traumatized” (p. 113). She goes on to discuss what it would mean to heal the generational trauma of the people injured by how the racism of slavery and segregation affected their ancestors and continues to affect them to this very day. She says, “Bearing God’s image means responding to ruin where we find it and pouring out blessing in that place so that it can be transformed” (p. 117). She tells how Jesus deconstructed the prejudice of his own day by traveling in the territory and interacting with Samaritans—a group of despised “others”—such as the woman at the well in John, chapter 4. “Think about a group or individual you have categorized as ‘them’,” says Langberg. “Is it possible that God is using their life and their voice to teach you more about himself?” (p. 119) Regardless of whether we share Langberg’s evangelical belief system—and I have some differences with it despite being a Christian myself—I see that hers is a humane and deeply moral vision of what it means to be a person. Even if one feels that being an evangelical is not the best approach to Christianity, Langberg seems to be presenting the best possible version of it.

In the next chapters Langberg talks directly about “Power Abused in the Church” and “Christendom Seduced by Power.” The ways that power is abused in the church are consistent with the way it is abused in other high-demand groups. I think the value of this chapter is that she uses scripture to explain why this is not okay, and from her evangelical perspective, not at all how God intends for things to go in his church. In the chapter on “Christendom Seduced by Power,” she talks about Christendom having “gotten in bed with secular powers, such as the state or the king.” I wondered as I read this if she was thinking specifically about evangelical identification with the Trump movement in this country, but she chooses to talk in more general terms about it. In any case, it is a perennial temptation for the Church to allow itself to be corrupted in that manner.

In the final section, “Power Redeemed,” Langberg lays out a vision of Christian life and community that is the opposite of the abusive exercise of authority by people who are protective of their systems and positions. She reminds us that Jesus stood against the abusive authorities of his time. She contrasts that with what Christian leaders today do when they exalt themselves, forgetting the example of Jesus, who humbled himself and poured himself out in loving service to those with whom he came in contact. She describes the way of the true follower of Jesus:

“Do you love God?” she asks. “Then go be a neighbor. . . . If it is true that God himself came into the flesh to the brokenhearted, the small, the afflicted, and the vulnerable, that truth needs to be lived out so that the world knows that it is real.” (p. 181)

Langberg closes the book with a very moving postlude where she describes her visit to the killing fields in Cambodia. She sees the killing fields as emblematic of the whole world and calls us to see the killing fields as the place where we have sent the abused to die every time we choose to protect our systems and institutions rather than the victims themselves. She contrasts the killing fields of Cambodia with the nation of Bulgaria which refused to send its Jewish population to Treblinka, the extermination camp in Poland, in spite of coming under tremendous pressure by the Nazis to do so. Each year the Bulgarian people commemorate the bravery of their leaders in the Ceremony of the Ungiven. Langberg closes the book by saying,

"May we, the church, be known as those who, in likeness to our Lord, use the power he grants to expose evil and protect the vulnerable. May we celebrate with him, and in his name, the Ceremony of the Ungiven." (p. 199)

Overall, I think Langberg has written an excellent book which well explains what is wrong with the abuse that, all too often, takes place in churches. She has a clear prescription for how to right this wrong, and I think Christian leaders and the church at large will be well-advised to consider her critique and her prescription for how to correct it. I strongly recommend this book.

About the Reviewer

Doug Duncan, MS, LPC, was a member of an aberrant religious group for more than twenty years. After defying the cult leader and marrying Wendy, they eventually left the cult and Doug began the task of rebuilding his life. He enrolled in a master's program in counseling and earned a degree and license to practice therapy. After working on their cult recovery issues by reading all the available cult literature, attending conferences, and becoming involved with ICSA, Doug and Wendy started a ministry to increase others' awareness and understanding of cults. They are frequent presenters at churches, civic groups, and conferences, and also facilitators of a support group for former members of cults and high-demand groups. Additionally, Doug offers individual counseling to former members.