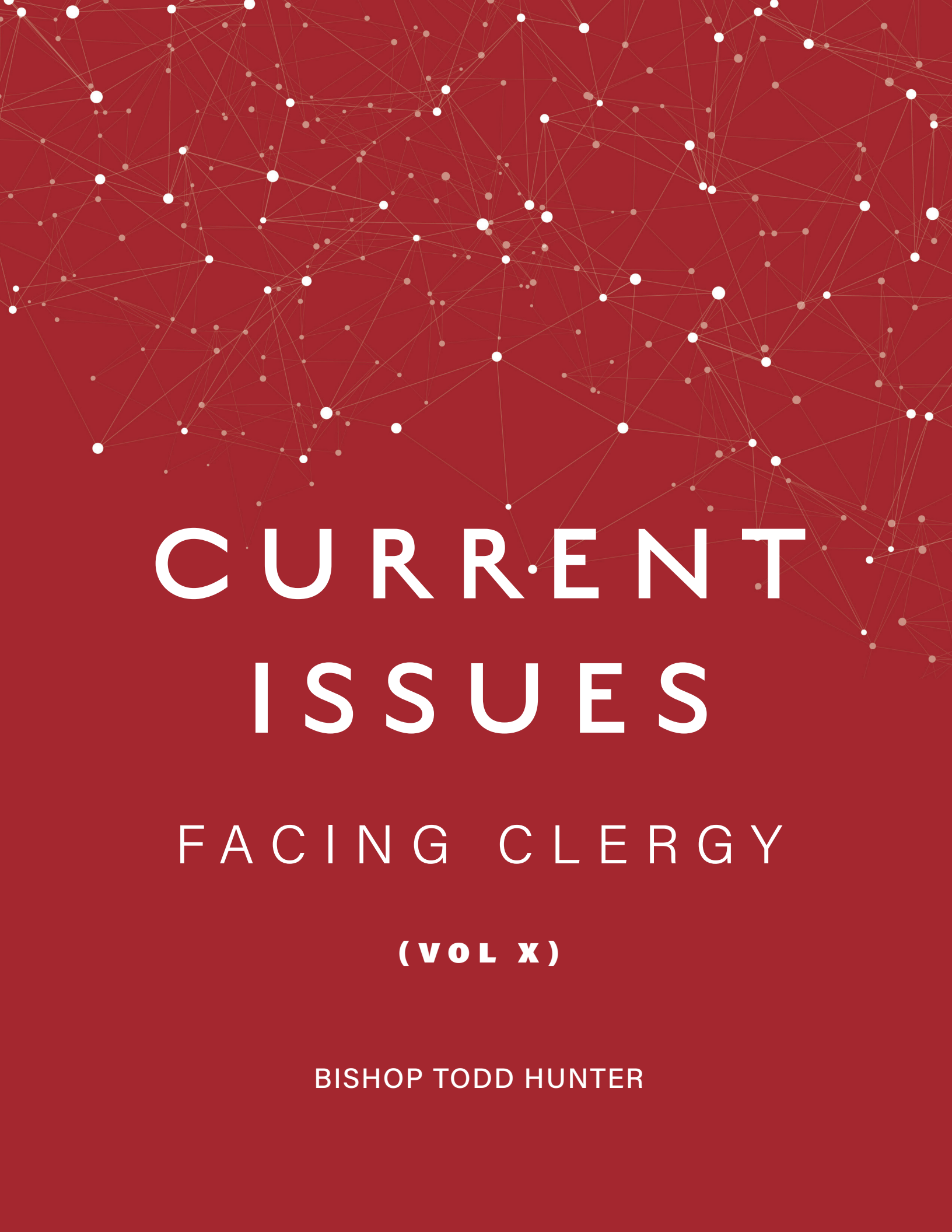


An abstract graphic of a network or constellation of white dots connected by thin white lines, set against a dark red background. The dots and lines are scattered across the top half of the image, creating a sense of interconnectedness and complexity.

CURRENT ISSUES

FACING CLERGY

(VOL X)

BISHOP TODD HUNTER

The Use and Abuse of Power

*Jesus returned to Galilee in
the power of the Spirit.
Luke 4:14*

*Jesus knew that the Father
had put all things under his
power.
John 13:3*

*With authority and power,
he gives orders to impure
spirits and they come out!
Luke 4:46*

*The people all tried to touch
him, because power was
coming from him and healing
them all.
Luke 6:19*

*Jesus called the Twelve
together and gave them
power and authority
to drive out all demons and
to cure diseases
Luke 9:1*

*I am going to send you what
my Father has promised;
but stay in the city until you
have been clothed with
power from on high.
Luke 24:49*

*You will receive power when
the Holy Spirit comes on you.
Acts 1:8*

*With great power the apostles
continued to testify to the
resurrection of the Lord Jesus.
Acts 4:33*

*Now Stephen, a man
full of God's grace
and power,
performed great
wonders and signs
among the people.
Acts 6:8*

*I will not venture to speak of anything
except what Christ has accomplished
through me in leading the Gentiles to
obey God by what I have said and done—
by the power of signs and wonders,
through the power of the Spirit of God.
Romans 5:18, 19*

*My message and
my preaching were
not with wise and
persuasive words,
but with a
demonstration of the
Spirit's power,
so that your faith
might not rest on
human wisdom, but
on God's power.
1 Corinthians 2:4, 5*

*For the kingdom of God is not a
matter of talk but of power.
1 Corinthians 4:20*

*I pray that out of his glorious
riches he may strengthen you with
power through his Spirit in your
inner being.
Ephesians 3:16*

Accidental explosions can trap miners, leading to dark, claustrophobic, fearful conditions worsened by body ache, hunger, and thirst. Other times, planned and specially focused explosives are the massive, forceful power used to move earth, opening a path through rock that frees trapped miners, bringing goodness, relief and joy.

Such is the nature of power: it can inflict evil or deliver from evil.

Gunpowder and various types of explosives have been used to maim and kill for 3,000 years. The power of fire has been misused to burn people at the stake or burn down enemy villages. The invention of the wheel has been misused for destructive power—think of cannons on wheels, etc. The misused power of industrialization shocked the world during World War I. Twitter, artificial intelligence, political offices, and corporate positions are all used for malevolent reasons today. Every advance in human technology is, in terms of power, an ethical challenge.

Just the thought of power causes some of us to become judgmental or to recoil in fear. With constant misuses of power in our faces, many of us wish that power would simply go away, vanish from human interactions. We surmise that a world without power would be more ethical, more loving, more just.

Many of us think cynically and wrongly about power.

But such thinking calls the wisdom of God into question.

Many of us think cynically and wrongly about power. This is not intellectual weakness. It is true: notions of power have indeed stretched the thinking of even the most gifted philosophers. But most of our errors regarding power come from viewing it through emotional, psychological and social/relational lenses. Say the word *power* and many people will think of tyrannical governments; bullying and manipulating religious leaders; or punitive, abusive parents.

But what if we start at a different place: someone says *power* (negatively construed), and we imagine the indescribable power of: *Let there be light*. We can think of the sun, with its awful dominance rising, still again, on another day, warming the earth, making human life possible. We might think of the wonder of flicking a switch and in an instant, through the miraculous power of alternating current, a darkened room becomes a place for work, creation or recreation.

Power Is of God

We need to rethink power. Power is of God. It is a never-ending part of creation because in God's loving, wise purposes, he determined it to be so. A clear example is the power of the human brain. Nothing in creation compares to it. Nothing in computing technology comes close to it. No progress in artificial intelligence gets near to the power God has invested in the combination of physical brain and metaphysical mind.

But I get people being uneasy about power. Power is seductive and easily misused. It easily becomes a source of leadership malpractice. It is understandable that we get mad at, and depressed by, misuses of power. It is appropriate to be angry at those who abuse people with power. We should wince at the latest news story revealing another leader who used power for selfish gain—sexual, financial, image-management, etc.

Some people misuse power because they think there is a limited amount of power available in a given setting: a family, a church staff, a board room, etc. But this is never the case. God's power is unlimited, inexhaustible—and God wants to share his power with those who are formed well to love well, those who have adopted God's aims as their own.

Often, leaders in hierarchical positions of power realize how little power they actually have. The Pope says many things that most people have no intention of following. I've felt this both as a parent of teenagers and in my many roles of church leadership. When a leader feels this impotence, there comes

a temptation to react, to power up, to use deception or even straight-out lies that manipulate people and situations for the leader's gain.

By God's good intention, power is an inescapable part of human life.

But the answer is not to try to make power go away. Power just *is*. By God's good intention, power is an inescapable part of human life. The answer to *misuse* is not *no* use, it is *right* use. Adam and Eve, who were delegated power from God, were to "rule and reign" with him. But the world is now fallen. Paul teaches us that *all creation groans*. Such groaning includes the victims of fallen uses of power.

We have lots of choices regarding power but banishing it from a social structure or from humanity as a whole is not possible. It would be like removing the "2" from H₂O. Creation would not be what it was intended. When we don't use the legitimate power of God, it corrupts us in other ways: we become disobedient, unloving, non-servants, leaving the dispossessed to fend for themselves. It is one thing to be careful with power—like dynamite—but it is another thing to shrink back from using godly power for the sake of the powerless. Such thinking lies behind the *moderation* Martin Luther King wrote about from the Birmingham jail.

Here, I think, is the conceptual core: *Power is only made ethical and effective when positioned within and executed in alignment to the Christ-based worldview which gave rise to Jesus' manner of being in the world, his ethical use of power.*

Power: The Palace or the Manger?

Writing during Advent, I am reminded of a podcast I recently heard by Pete Scazzero. Contrasting Herod and Jesus, Pete observes that on the world's stage there are always two types of power at work—each flowing from their own nature and yielding corresponding practices.

In Herod, we note self-interest, jealousy, fear and the need to control all outcomes. These disordered desires rationalized the misuse of power seen in his brutal treatment of others. To staunch his fear of uprisings, Herod killed his own wife and sons. Herod may have killed a million people. Hardly a day went past when he did not execute someone for some twisted purpose. It was said of Herod: *I'd rather be one of his swine—they have a better chance of living...*

For Herod, apparently this was true: *Do anything to feel safe and secure.*

Herod was a tool of Rome, propped up to keep order. He was good at brokering deals between Rome and the Jews. Herod was an amazing architect and an effective, successful builder. But several things stood against this success: he built to suit his ego and fulfill his greed; he built using slave labor; and he built to placate and honor Caesar.

Misuse of power is often rewarded by those who benefit from power-malpractice.

We cannot rely on our feelings about power.

On the other hand, there is Jesus. He is not the tool of political power. He is the Son of God. His parents likely walked past Herod's opulent palace in Bethlehem to get to the manger: an insignificant, dark stable or small cave; dirty and smelly. Herod and his palaces towered over everything. Jesus seemed weak, small, and vulnerable.

Didn't that make Herod the real king, the one who had the most power?

No.

Scazzero describes the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of Herod as a cautionary tale concerning power: *things are not as they appear to be*. Our intuitions frequently let us down in this regard. We cannot rely on our feelings about power. Mary, the shepherds and the Magi understood

this. Their faith in humble, unheralded power was practical, embodied, lived.

Ethical use of power flowed from the manger. It was not housed in the palace.

Herod, consumed with fear and fixated on jealousy, died a miserable death. Though rightfully known for his stunning buildings, among his contemporaries he was known mostly for killing.

Jesus, who died naked and poor on a Roman implement of torture, brought life to world. He is known for healing, for deliverance from evil and for the wisdom of his teaching. Contrary to Herod, Jesus, by the power of God, rose from the dead. He is alive and is worshipped for his selflessness. Jesus is renowned for using his power to create life, to superintend humanity to its God-ordained fulfillment. Presently he is using power as he reigns at the right hand of the Father.

Power born of the manger is always used to honor God and serve others.

Power born from the palaces of worldly influence pollutes, ruins and destroys.

Maybe the Apostle John had in mind the contrast between Herod and Jesus:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. (1 John 3:16)

Thinking of the contrast between Herod and Jesus—

If we must tell people: *I'm the leader around here!* it is a sure sign that we are not their leader.

If we must posture ourselves and act strong to get what we want, it will lead to the long-term weakness associated with pretense, which is a form of deceit.

If we must control everything, we will end up with little to control.

Capacity to Do Good

Yet...

To do the good we feel called to do, we want power. Power is simply capacity, ability or agency. "Anything that can accomplish an end is a form of power."¹ When we pray for the ability to make a positive difference in a situation, we are praying for power or authority.

Jesus thought that power was best used through the heart of a servant.

Jesus is celebrated for his possession of and ethical use of power and authority to bring about the good:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 4:23-25)

¹ *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, 779.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons...

(Mark 1: 32-34)

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:38)

Redeeming Power as an Aspect of Formation and Mission

If Christ is the head of his body, and if Christians are to be in Christ, then his power is meant to flow through us—not for our gain, but for the good of others: to heal, liberate, empower and strengthen. As servants of Jesus, we use/share power for the common good of persons who are each uniquely made in the image of God. It is a part of kingdom ministry to give special attention to those with little power and diminished voices.

Jesus thought that power was best used through the heart of a servant:

Jesus called [the Twelve] together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

(Mark 10:42-45)

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life... (John 10:17)

A word from Paul is also helpful here:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:19)

To do something in the name of someone else is to speak or act according to that person's characteristics. This means the effective and ethical use of power is tied directly to the transformation of our soul into Christlikeness. Thus, spiritual formation is always the inner core of Christian ministry.

We must become the kinds of leaders who both seek appropriate spiritual power and the inner character necessary to it.

Everything we do—preaching, teaching, leading in various settings, counseling, giving spiritual advice, mediating troubled relationships—all these are always exercises of power. Thus, we must become the kinds of leaders who both seek appropriate spiritual power and the inner character necessary to it. Galatians 5 (the fruit of the Spirit) and 1 Corinthians 12–14 (the manifestation of gifts in and through the Church) are the railroad tracks upon which our ministries must run.

We want to be like Stephen:

*...full of grace **and** power...*

Acts 6:8

The question is not: *Is power good?* The question is: *Can I handle it?*

Don't strive for positions of power or authority. Strive to be the kind of person who others naturally trust—no matter what level of power you might have. But in general, the more the power we have, the more we need to seek the



transformation of our hearts and souls; our will and desires; our self-consciousness and our public posturing. Godly use of means (power and authority) must be matched to godly ends.

Doing the Good: More Love...More Power

Ministers are currently working against great principalities and powers: social, political, medical and religious. Jesus has defeated these powers, but we live in the time between kingdom-inauguration and kingdom-consummation. A spiritual battle rages. Our world is tormented with sicknesses. Millions of people are trapped like miners, desperately seeking rescue. Our current challenges call for Christian ministers to let the power of God flow through them for the sake of deliverance.

Jesus is both our source and model for the effective and ethical use of power.

Pray for the courage to lead non-anxiously in the days in which God ordained you to live and lead. Ask for more power, for more of the capacity to do the good you dream to do in the world. And seek more love, more of the deep-seated desire to intend the good of others.

Jesus knew that the power of his Father was at work in him. His sole priority was to work in harmony with that power, to let it flow through him for the healing of the world.

Jesus, by his life and by the sending of his Spirit, is both our source and model for the effective and ethical use of power. Thus, I daily, moment by moment, give myself to Jesus. I never tire of it. It is a joy to apprentice myself to Jesus to learn about power, character and love...with the constant prayer that his power and love would lead to me living a life of consistent creative goodness for the sake of others.

