

There's a church in our town that teaches its members that the men are the head of the household. This is a central tenet of their faith, gets talked about a lot, starting with the youngest children. Many of the children attend the elementary school where Joan works and she says that by the time the kids are in kindergarten, they're already starting to embody this message of male power and superiority. The boys tend to be bossy, sometimes even challenging Joan, which they quickly learn isn't advisable, and the girls tend to be submissive and timid, so Joan gives them lessons on being what she calls PW's, or powerful women. I was driving by their church the other day and noticed they were adding on, so I told Joan about it, and she said, "Oh, yeah, they're starting a school for the children in their church." I told her they were doing it to offset the "Joan effect."

It's the only church I know that doesn't have any elders or deacons or leadership, other than the pastor. All the power is concentrated in the hands of the pastor. Eventually, the pastor who started the church retired and picked his successor, who happened to be, wait for it, his son. Now his son is in charge. And here's the pecking order. The children answer to their mothers, the mothers answer to their husbands, and the husbands answer to the pastor. As the king in Mel Brook's movie, *The History of the World, Part I*, says, "It's good to be the king."

We've been talking about the differences between healthy and unhealthy religion. Here are the distinctions we've made so far:

The goal of unhealthy religion is purity, while the goal of healthy religion maturity.

Unhealthy religion can't tolerate ambiguity, so insists on having one correct answer. Healthy religion is quite comfortable with questions and can sit with them all day long.

Unhealthy religion rewards good behavior by promising a reward, usually in an afterlife we have no proof exists. Healthy religion does good simply because it is the right and noble thing to do, and therefore is its own reward.

Unhealthy religion relates to God through appeasement. God is angry and the goal of religion is to placate him. Healthy religion relates to God through appreciation and gratefulness.

Today, I want to observe another distinction between healthy and unhealthy religion, and that is this: In unhealthy religion, the power goes up. Think of a funnel turned upside-down. At the wide part of the funnel are the people, and the power is taken from them and directed toward the top, so the higher you are, the more concentrated power you have. Consequently, the lower you are, the less power you have. In fact, the lower you are, the fewer your choices become, until you are finally left with only one command, and that is to obey.

This is in distinct contrast to the way of Jesus, who spent a great deal of time cautioning others about the spiritual and moral danger of concentrated power, of the power elite. “Beware of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they’ll make you twice a child of hell! Watch out for the chief priests! Keep your eye on Herod, he’s a fox!” Time and again, he warned against the accumulation of power in the hands of those least able to use it with tenderness and wisdom.

Instead, Jesus sought to empower people. When those in authority wanted to enslave, Jesus wanted to empower. “You will do even greater things than I’ve done,” he told them. That is a statement of empowerment. And when does empowerment happen? When are people empowered? When leaders realize that communities are best served, are most creative and transformative, when people are empowered, not enslaved. Empowerment happens when leaders are eager to see others do even greater things than they have done.

So because you’re a leader—you’ve heard me say this before, each of us are leaders, each of us have at least one area in our lives where we exercise leadership—so because you’re a leader, your goal as a leader should be to equip and empower people, not enslave them. Anyone can be a tyrant. Anyone can be abusive. Anyone can crack the whip and compel people to do their bidding. That takes no imagination, integrity, or intelligence. But to empower and equip others to do great things, that’s the most meaningful work we can do.

Friends, let me tell you something, and I have seen this time and again and know of what I speak. The most difficult people you will encounter in life are those whose hunger for power and control have corroded their humanity. Don't let that happen to you. Don't let that be said of you.

I had this old guy in one of my churches once. He was a retired executive and when he retired he was given a leadership role in the church, because everyone assumed that since he'd been a boss, he'd make a good leader in the church. So we put him in charge of the committee that helped folks in need. But it was a disaster. Someone would come up with an idea, and he'd shoot it down. If it wasn't his idea, he didn't like it. Before long, no one wanted to serve on his committee. His term couldn't expire fast enough. We appointed a bus driver in his place. The man didn't say anything, but I could tell it made him mad to be replaced with a bus driver. Well, that bus driver, she was tremendous, because she didn't care who got the credit.

Someone would suggest something and she'd say, "That's a fine idea. Let's give it a try."

Several years later, the man died. His funeral was packed. People heard he was dead, and they wanted to see it for themselves. It was the oddest funeral. There wasn't a tear in that whole room. The only thing people said was, "That Bill was a piece of work."

Then the bus driver died and her funeral came and there wasn't a dry eye in the place. Person after person stood and told what a joy it had been to know her. Even the kids on her school bus route showed up, forty years later.

The man had seized power and the woman had shared it. I did both their funerals, the man and the woman's, and though I didn't mention the differences between them, everyone in our meeting knew the differences between the man and the woman, and thus were unmoved by the first life and deeply moved by the second.

Small people make others smaller.

Great people empower other people to do great things. Thus did Jesus, our teacher, say, "You will do even greater things than I."