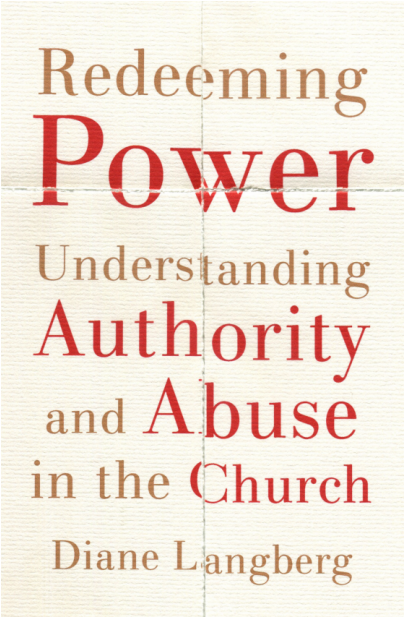
Review: Redeeming Power – Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

In this current moment many Christians are deconstructing their understanding of church. Covid has catalysed it but not caused it. As the *forms* of church have been stripped away it seems that many are questioning the *substance* in their church experience.



Gill and I have found ourselves in numerous related conversations. No two of them are alike, of course, but there tends to be some common factors. In most, there is a sense of wanting to "cash out" of a religious framework that had previously been "bought into". Sometimes, but rarely, it's a form of deconversion. Sometimes it's a desire to question the unquestionable, perhaps like in Ecclesiastes, to see if there *is* actually something new under the sun. "After 18 months of covid, I'm now not sure why I was getting out of bed on a Sunday morning." "I've now had a positive experience outside of the typical Sunday, and have realised it was negative experience inside, this *can't* be what it's all about." This is not the typical whinge of consumeristic disappointment ("Pastor, I'm just not being *fed!*") it's of simply of being *done* with church on it's own terms: "This is not the dynamic gospel-embodying radically-believing community of Jesus-loving disciples that it pretends to be!"

After two decades in professional pastoral ministry I'm going through my own gentle deconstruction. This is no bad thing. It is part of maturation to go through times in which the grace of the Lord has us being "undone." From dealing with my childhood issues in Bible College, through a breakdown at the pointy end of church planting, to the small-boat-big-ocean experience of moving between hemispheres, it's all part of the letting-it-die-to-rise-again cruciform shape of life with Jesus. You can't be a leader without passing through these times. Yet this post-covid moment feels like a *big* reset impacting across the body of Christ; I'm waiting for it to hurt, timing the contractions of what might be.

It is in *this* context that I have encountered Diane Langberg's *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*. I have very few "must read" books for those who are in or considering church leadership and this is now one of them. It is good, solid, biblical, insightful wisdom for general application. In dealing with abuse, it relates to these times; in with and through the pandemic, the church world has also been rocked by revelations of spiritual and sexual predation in prominent organisations. There is *much* introspection about systemic injustices and abuses going on. Consider Langberg's interview on Justin Brierley's *Unbelievable?* podcast and her master class at the European Leadership Forum.

Langberg's wisdom is also a light for the present deconstruction. Personally, she has taken me to an examination of my own ecclesiastical trauma, including my own complicity and weakness, as well as helping me dare to imagine the ideal of what might be. Reading it has been a deeply personal experience. I simply can't review the book objectively; all I can do is to enter into a dialogue with it:

First interaction: For Langberg, **power is *real* and ubiquitous, and can be used for good.** Power is not conflated with evil.

My reflection: Very few of my ecclesial traumas have come through domineering powermongery, although I have heard those testimonies. Rather, I have collided with those who are *blind* to their hurtful exercise of power. In fact, some toxic situations are constructed by those who *deny* having any power at all! There's delusion in it, and also manipulation, a form of leadership nihilism. By eschewing the formalities of power, manipulations are brought below the threshold of what can be "called out" and so accountability is avoided. To hold a leadership position in such a context is to be both loaded with unattainable expectation (so that the ineffectiveness of "power" can be proven), and, at the same time, be shunned because of the taint of the title. It is weary, and lonely, and toxic.

Langberg's view of power is more robust. As one who is literally an expert on the *misuse* of power, she offers a profound and edifying reminder: there is goodness in the power of *Jesus.* This is truly affirming: "Are you verbally powerful? The Word gave you that power. Are you physically powerful? The mighty God, who breaks down strongholds and sustains the universe, gave you that power. Do you have a powerful position? It is from the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords…" (page 10). It also gives the proper bounds:

> *Godly power is derivative; it comes from a source outside us. It is always used under God's authority and in likeness to his character. It is always exercised in humility, in love to God. We use it first as his servants and then, like him, as servants to others. It is always used for the end goal of bringing glory to God. God is pleased with his Son. That means our uses of power must look like Christ because he is the One who brings God glory. (Page 13)*

Langberg is thoroughly biblical, and therefore *instructs* me in the healthy ways to hold what power I have: "We need the truth of the written Word of God and of the Word of God made flesh

to help us see how to live out what God says, or we will lose our way, interpreting the written Word through the lens of culture and tradition and easily bending what is written into our own ends" (page 88).

Second interaction: Langberg understands **vulnerability**.

I have experienced cruelty in the church: Biting words. Shunning actions. I have known leaders who deflect their emotional burdens so as to foist them onto the shoulders of those who are weaker and at risk of injury. I can remember two times when words cut into me and left me to bleed; both times they were on the lips of those "above me" in the Church of England. They weren't godly rebukes (I've had plenty of those) or wise, "hard" words of appropriate correction, they were words of diminishment moved by insecurity in one instance, and prejudice in the other. I had no recourse to emotional defense or safety; they didn't see my vulnerability or didn't care. Vulnerability isn't just powerlessness, though. At other times, even though I was one of the most powerful persons in the room, the attacks were more covert, aimed at those that I love rather than directly at me. No one is invulnerable.

Part of my turmoil is that I am *tired* of being vulnerable. I would like some *safety* please, a place to rest, a freedom to not be dependent on those who do not have my wellbeing at the top of their priority list. However, I have also learned that if you can't lean into your vulnerability you can't exercise your power well. "You and I struggle to understand our own vulnerabilities and to manage them wisely" (page 28), Langberg says, and it's a necessary task. "Vulnerability and power are intertwined, engaged in a dance that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes destructive" (page 19).

Here's the key: Vulnerability is a "welcome gift" (page 22), a vehicle for our own growth, and for the building of trusting, deep, beautiful relationships." Which means, also, that it needs to be *guarded,* "because it is unwise to make yourself

vulnerable in abusive situations… **Maturity is learning where to guard ourselves, and where to lead from our weakness.**" I genuinely *love* the church, but note what that means: "The capacity to love makes everyone vulnerable… even God" (page 26). A journey through the world of church is often like walking through a battlefield marked by fortresses, no-man's lands, and battlefronts. We get tired from the exposure, and we seek castles of our own. I *feel* the draw of the drawbridge, but what would that look like, and would it actually be healthy and *loving?*

There's a tension to embrace here: To express love, we learn to offer ourselves vulnerably. To receive love, we create as much safety and security so that the vulnerability of others doesn't lead to their injury. How, then, do we offer safety from a place of insecurity; how can we offer a safety that we have not yet, first, received? In our experience, the normal machinations of church life struggle to embrace that tension. Church should manifest a shared mutual experience, a dynamic of abiding in the heart of God in whom we are perfectly, ultimately, safe, and therefore free to be vulnerable, and free to love. The fact that it often doesn't feeds the deconstruction.

Langberg explores this dynamic, in particular, with regard to gender and race dynamics. As a large white guy, this is instructive for me. Do others feel vulnerable where I feel safe? Compared to others it is relatively *easy* for me to find safety; this almost *defines* my privilege. It's on me to understand the vulnerabilities of others: In one experience I found myself aware of others' negative experiences of church leaders. Understandably, as a church leader, I was "lumped" into that box of unsafe people and, to some degree, I wore the face of those who had injured them. In a context of mistrust, my leading needed to be both aware of the trauma and yet shaped by freedom rather than that abusive legacy. It takes Jesus' wisdom to walk that line, and my inadequacy is obvious.

Langberg is instructive; picking up on the language of "headship" in the gender dynamic she gives insight into that way of Christ: "To be a head is to turn the curse upside down, not to rule over others. The Son of Man did not rule, though his disciples longed for him to do so. Instead he held out his great arms and said, 'Come. It is safe.'" (Page 104).

Third interaction: Langberg understands **deception, at a systemic, cultural level.**

> *Systemic abuse occurs when a system, such as a family, a government, entity, a school, a church or religious organization, a political group, or a social service organization, enables the abuse of the people it purports to protect. (Page 75)*

I've remarked previously how the Church of England, like many church institutions, is abusive by default. If we were to describe, for instance, a marriage relationship as being marked by financial dependence, spiritualised language of authority, the priority of reputation over truth, decisions being made for-and-not-with, and gaslighting condescension, all our alarm bells would ring! Yet this often describes the relationship with institution for those in a pastoral position, along with their family. The harm is mitigated, sometimes even eliminated, when good people are in authority and they are are able to resist and overcome the natural tendencies of the organisation. Langberg calls those things the "fundamental, though often hidden, properties of the system itself" (page 76) and reflects on how easily we refrain from speaking honestly about them. It leads to "…preserving an institution rather than the humans meant to flourish in it" (page 78).

All of this rests, of course, on forms of deception and self-deception which, itself, rests on a form of subtle idolatry. Langberg locates this at the heart of the first sin (page 29):

We deceive ourselves by agreeing that we do not *need* God in order to be like him in nature and character. We cover our vulnerabilities by leaning into other things – "toxins" of deception. A common idol to lean into – for safety, preferment, provision, comfort, purpose – is the church itself. The result "is clear that we have preferred our organizational trappings to the holiness of God." (page 79). The result is harm:

> *Deceived hearts are closed hearts. They are closed first to the God of truth and second to other humans. Deception always does damage to the one deceiving and to those being deceived. (Page 40)*

Deconstruction, at its gut, is a reaction to this hidden hypocrisy. "Deceptions are systemic" (page 37), Langberg says. If we're brave, we might seek to name them. In my own context of the Church of England some of them are obvious: Class, education, and position correlate to worth; That which exists is necessarily favoured by God and should not be questioned; Institutional deference is the same as unity in Christ.

Collective deception incorporates a form of blindness and therefore foments a culture of suspicion. Langberg speaks of the dueling cultures of "secular culture" and "Christendom" (page 47) and that war is real: On the one hand is the machinery of the religio-industrial complex, consumeristic, and self-centred. On the other hand is the graceless pseudo-gospel of post-post-modern humanism. Both are defensively defined. "Any human not transformed by the redeeming work of Jesus Christ lives out of self as center" (page 47). In the no man's land in the war of attrition between the two, it is lonely. Even good gospel words – "discipleship", "mission", "kingdom of God", and even "Christ" – cannot be trusted. "Good words can whitewash evil" (page 50).

> *"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 matters. How we flesh out our good words matters." (page 52).*

It's easy to become cynical. It's easy to become bitter. It's easy to long for the false-comfort and false-community that might come by joining one of the camps. I admire Langberg for clearly being at home in the middle, digging into and holding truth.

For instance, as she explores the question of the gender imbalance, she fulsomely critiques the patriarchy: "…violence is the male's right, and the burden of managing it is the female's" (page 93). But this is no shallow deconstruction. Rather than dismiss marriage, itself, as an abusive framework, Langberg speaks of "familiar theological words and concepts" that are misused to "sanction or minimize abuse and crush human beings." (page 94). In this she takes the same line as Barbara Roberts (who I've written on before) in recognising that while "God hates divorce" this is not merely the "termination of a legal relationship" but the "disunion" caused by abandonment and abuse (pages 94-95).

Indeed, Gill and I have often found a correlation between abusive systems and the treatment of marriage relationships. I literally cheered out loud, therefore, as Langberg affirms the mutual ministry of Priscilla and Aquila: "Priscilla was not just serving coffee or 'supporting' Aquila. She is mentioned first in four out of five instances… Do you perhaps have a silenced Priscilla in your church? (pages 100-01). Priscilla and Aquila are a side-by-side ministry that Gill and I have looked to as our own exemplars. Most church cultures cannot cope with them. They will split a couple either by insisting on subjugation or individualism. Over the years, it is in this area that Gill and I have felt the most disempowered, and pondered the cost of staying within the institutions we were

in. There is a real spiritual component to this; to the extent that a marriage relationship speaks of the relationship between Christ and his people, a self-deceived organisation will seek to diminish it.

Langberg also spends some time interacting with the systemic issues of race. I've just interacted with Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility, so I won't delve into that too much here. She takes us, however, to the more general issues of collective guilt and shame that are thoroughly missional in impact. She asks, "Do we really think that we can enslave millions of people for more than two hundred years, treating them as things to be used, crushing, oppressing, and humiliating them, without long-term effects reverberating throughout generations descended from both slaves and slaveholders?" (pages 111-112). In the English church we would do well to ponder what our unresolved legacies are. We have not yet dealt with the abuse of either our own classes and peoples, or our external dealings with the wider world. Our systemic deceptions are rooted in our shame, meaning that England cannot love itself well. The call on the Church of England is to lead the way, without falling back to the comfortable deceptions of either denialism or self-flagellation. In the meantime we are perpetually self-starved of missional efficacy. We should learn from the "intergenerational transmission of trauma" (page 113). If we wish to see God's kingdom come, we need to bring reconciliation and healing to this land, beginning in ourselves.

Fourth interaction: Langberg understands **abuse within the church**.

It is a grace that I only have secondary experience of predation in church institutions. But I do *have* that experience; I have observed, from one step away, the nature and impact of predatory abuse on individuals and churches. My own experience of abuse is that of *negligence* rather than predation. Langberg speaks to the toxicity that can breed

both.

For instance, a useful general point that Langberg makes cuts across our elevation of *external* qualities of position and charisma. These speak of power, but not of character. She takes us to Jesus: “Listen to the Word of God: ‘What comes *out* of a person is what defiles him. For *from within,* out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness…” (page 25). I personally have found it relatively easy to not be enamoured by academic prowess or formal titles; the Australian in me is naturally wary of pretension. Indeed, “an ability to articulate theological truths does *not* mean the speaker is an obedient servant of God” (page 127).

What has taken me longer to size up is the allure of *success*, and of wanting to simply *belong* to a movement or spiritual family who might offer covering and security. “All of us long for meaning, purpose, connection, and blessing. The systems of Christendom offer us these things” (page 147). There is compulsion to *prove* oneself worthy of inclusion, and that is, invariably, a toxic dynamic. When it is fed, and the *performance* is rewarded more than formation and maturation, abuse abounds. Langberg’s observations apply to our present church culture:

> *A leader is expected to know more, achieve more, and perform better. The more adequate they are in those areas, the more they are declared a success. Leadership is thus reduced to a never-ending treadmill of acquiring more and better skills and achieving impressive results. (Page 128)*
>
> *Character work and an understanding of one’s personal history are not usually emphasized in training for ministry. This is unwise giving our heart’s capacity for deception. (Page 130)*

I have filled out a number of application forms for pastoral

roles in my time. *None* of them specifically ask about wilderness experiences (page 131) or of the maturation that comes in dry times and adversity; they *all* ask for proof of numerical growth, and offer a box for credentials and publications. We run to managerial and financially-driven structural changes, yet the reality is that "pastors and leaders often live with little to no oversight… longing for good mentors" (page 131). We have left behind the traditions of spiritual direction, confession, and apprenticeship and have professionalised ourselves into courses and criteria. No wonder people get hurt.

I have been comforted by Langberg here. It is easy to carry the pain and shame of church trauma. Yet, the fact of that speaks to the deficiencies of the abuser and the abusive system, not the wounded ones (page 25). I have seen my teenage children summon emotional resilience and tenacity to weather circumstances that were beyond their control. The simple fact is that some of the roles I have inhabited have brought my family into an unsafe environment. I have searched my soul, I have blamed myself. But in the end there is grace in an honest grief: Their vulnerability was not their, or my, fault.

What I have found necessary, in the aftermath, is to wrestle with my *powerlessness*. Langberg brings her analysis and reveals what power looks like in a spiritual context (page 132-133). This was helpful to me. Despite the "power" of my ordination and the ministry titles I have held, my predominant experience of church life has been *disempowerment*. There are blessings and joys and brothers and sisters within the church of course; these are gifts from God. But they are usually gifts *in* the context, and not usually of it. It is simply the case, that the decades I have given the church have *restrained* me more than flourished me: socially, financially, and even in terms of my own dreams and longings. The church has not, ultimately had my back, it cannot, ultimately, be "for" me. This is simply the way it is; it is the cost of vocation, and

it has been from the beginning. Even St. Paul as he writes to Christians who are rich in themselves, reflects on how he has become “scum of the earth” and “garbage of the world” in comparison (see 1 Corinthians 4:13).

As I work through the impact of this on my life and my faith, I hear similar echoes in the current deconstructions. I *love* the church of God. I *remain moved* to do my bit to see God’s kingdom come. I hope to speak words of life, and facilitate life-changing hospitality. I am drawn to know the heart of the Father and do what I see him doing. Yet, at the same time, I cannot recall the last time I saw in myself, or the church, a spirit of freedom and joyous expectation. To engage with the church is to steel ourselves for potential trauma, and to long for God. “Victims assume that God is also silent. Many people have asked me through the years whether they can find help for restoring their sense of safety in the house of God. that such a question must be asked is frankly, damnable” (page 137).

Fifth Interaction: Langberg understands the **redemption of power**.

My journey through this book has taken me to some of my pains and regrets. That’s fine; it is necessary, sometimes, to take stock of one’s injuries, and the temptations and weaknesses that leave us open to hurt. I’m still “hungry for safety” (page 153), for instance, and I need to be aware of how that drives me. I want to use whatever power I have for good and not for ill.

There is grace in the pain, and I see that affirmed in Langberg’s treatise. I have had a blessed breakdown. I am willing to “let the work die” (see page 149) because I know from experience that those who seek to save their church, and strive for performance, will lose it. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. I learned that “long before God called [me] to shepherd, he called [me] first and foremost to be his lamb – a silly, stupid lamb who does stupid things, follows others into

ravines, and allows themselves to get devoured" (page 150). It's all about grace.

I am learning – learning *again* perhaps, although it feels like it's from scratch – the necessity of prayer. Many of us leaders forget to pray (page 151), we forget to hope. Hoping hurts. Jesus only did what he sees the Father doing. He did that "no matter the cost. He did not work to preserve a system, even one originally ordained by God" (page 154).

I am wary of the future. We should read Langberg as a prophet, warning us, calling us, berating us as churches tear themselves to shreds. "Rather than dealing with our own discomfort, self-absorption, or fear of matters not going our way, we distance ourselves and label and dehumanize others", she says (page 56). We've got some difficult conversations in the Church of England coming up, and they are surrounded by toxicity.

I am even wary of releasing this interaction onto this blog. I am used to "thinking publicly" and have written about politics and all sorts of difficult issues in the past. But there will be some who won't get what I am writing here. I *feel* my vulnerability in the institution to which I belong. "Some of us have faced the power of systems that proclaim God's name yet look nothing like him. That power can be formidable. It's hard to fight an organic whole, particularly when a system is full of people we love or those important to us and our future" (page 82).

Where then lies the hope? Matching Langberg's metaphor on page 51, one night I had a dream: Gill and I were in a situation in which we were required to live in a certain house. It was horrible. Excrement on the walls. Mould and mildew. Holes in the walls which let in frigid air and provided hideaways for poisonous spiders. It was a nightmare. It was a "home" in which constant vigilance was required in order to survive. If that is a metaphor for church life, then what is the answer?

Reform is no longer enough. Renewal is no longer enough. Not even revival. What is needed is *resurrection*; a "burning down" is required, from which the new can emerge. That's not a negative thing. I think Jesus' friend Peter promised something like it, for "it is time for judgement to begin with God's household" (1 Peter 4:17).

Perhaps the deconstructions at the beginnning of the post-covid reconstructions are a context where this can happen. Covid has stripped away our forms and many of our churches have found that there wasn't much substance underneath. There is a lesson to heed here: "**God does not preserve the form without regard for content. God wants purity in the kingdom of the heart, not the appearance of it in a system.** Our systems, our countries, our faith groups, our tribes, and our organizations are *not* the kingdom of God." (page 84).

Like all prophets, Langberg therefore, sees the value of hope in the time of trouble. "The voices of victims today, of those abused and violated and crushed in our "Christian" circles, are in fact the voice of our God to his people" (page 190), she says. In that way they are "troublers" in the best sense of the word; the "'Valley of Trouble' is God ordained, and in this place, he is calling his people back to himself" (page 190). Langberg writes, therefore, to encourage the *dissidents* and to give succour to those who are lonely.

> *Jesus sat apart from those who stood together in his day. It is quite a picture, isn't it? In the same manner and spirit of Jesus, all Christians should be dissidents in the corrupt systems of this world, including in our own beloved institutions. (Page 85)*

This is where this book has catalysed my wrestling. To survive what is coming I need to learn to be with Jesus in the lonely place, in the solitude of dependence on him. That is where my safety lies. "The discipline of living under the governance of

God in the hidden places is a lifelong work.” (page 176). Only from here can the beautiful vision of the church, that Langberg *never* loses, emerge; it’s a beautiful vision of what she calls “Lady Ecclesia” (page 181).

> *The people of God who compose the body of Christ on earth are to live fully and faithfully under the lordship, authority, and mastery of Jesus Christ.* ***If we are to be mastered, we must know him.*** *(Page 186)*

Intimacy is required. If “we love and worship the system or our church more than we love and worship Jesus Christ” (page 187) it all falls apart. This is a truly pastoral book. As I’ve conversed with it, it has exposed me to some honest reality, and thus thoroughly brought me, in the end, to Jesus.

Amen.