STUDIA NAUK TEOLOGICZNYCH
TOM 21 (2026)

DOI: 10.24425/snt.2026.712

Received: APR 27, 2026
Accepted: JUN 22, 2026
Published: NOV 20, 2026

BEATE KOWALSKI
Technical University Dortmund, Germany
ORCID: 0000-0001-8222-2042

ABUSE OF POWER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SENSITIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

The abuse of power is a topical issue in society, politics and the Church. Research into this area, and particularly efforts to prevent it, are still in their initial stages.[1] Power and the abuse of power are inextricably linked to every human life. No human relationship is free from the exercise of power and its abuse. Abuse of power is particularly prevalent in highly hierarchical systems. In less hierarchical systems, power is exercised in a more subtle manner. Overwhelm, an attempt to compensate for one's own weaknesses, and perceptions of one's role can all be contributing factors. Deficits in basic (social) skills, mental constitution, emotional stability or affective maturity are further factors. People with narcissistic tendencies, in particular, abuse their power; in doing so, they exploit the reversal of roles between perpetrator and victim to maintain their power and avoid their own feelings of shame.

[1] Cf. the research project of Martine Jungers; the DFG project FOR 5778: Macht und Missbrauch in der römisch-katholischen Kirche – Interdisziplinäre Kritik und Analyse (leader: Anja Middelbeck-Varwick). The aim is to conduct an analysis of the systemic factors underlying the abuse of power within the Church (the perspectives of those affected, the institutionalisation and constitution of power).

Copyright (c) 2026 Beate Kowalski. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 4.0 Poland (CC BY-ND 4.0 PL) License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/deed.en), which permits copying and redistribution of the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original author and source are properly cited. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

The negative side of power, in particular, is deeply intertwined with human weakness and sinfulness. In this regard, it is a topic that theologians must address. Examples of the use and abuse of power can be found on almost every page of the Bible. Although this article focuses on the New Testament, we should first recall one of the many family narratives from the Book of Genesis, which is also significant for the Passion narratives in the Gospels: the story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50, which portrays him as exploiting his status as his father's favourite son to the disadvantage of his brothers. He takes advantage of his privileged position within the family. This sets off a spiral of violence, as his brothers react with envy and a desire to destroy their hated brother. Yet, after a long process of maturation brought about by suffering, he becomes the saviour of his brothers. He does not use his newly acquired position of power in Egypt for his own benefit, but for the salvation of his people. The example of Joseph illustrates the destructive consequences of abusing power. The roles of perpetrator and victim remain intertwined until one of the parties involved has matured enough to use their power for the benefit of others. One can observe both a blurring of the lines between victim and perpetrator and victim-blaming, which is extremely dangerous and traumatic for those affected by abuse. It leaves a trace in the soul for a considerable period of time.

This is just one example from the long history of salvation, to which many others could be added (Paganini 2024, 19–68; Peetz 2024, 26–29; Wacker 2017, 99–115; Spielman 1999, 251–59; Timmer 2014, 101–18; Eck 2018, 4–25; Stiebert 2003, 195–215). However, the focus here will be on examples from the New Testament writings. These were not written with the intention of explicitly addressing the topic of power and the abuse of power. Nevertheless, both themes are implicitly present in almost all the writings. From a hermeneutical perspective, it must be borne in mind that the New Testament writings originate from a different culture and era. Furthermore, particularly in the case of the narrative writings, it should be noted that whilst the characters appearing in them are historical figures, they are portrayed in a highly fictionalised, literary manner. The theological perspective of the specific New Testament writer makes it difficult to trace back to the historical Jesus and present him as a role model in dealing with the abuse of power.

This article intends to promote awareness of the issue of abuse of power, to reflect on one's own behaviour in the light of biblical role models, and finally to draw conclusions for pastoral prevention work. As it is not possible to cover this topic in full here, examples have been selected from various literary and historical contexts within the New Testament. But first, we need to clarify the terms: what does the New Testament mean by 'power' and 'abuse of power'?

I. DEFINITIONS

Power and the abuse of power in biblical texts are marginal topics in exegetical research (Westermeyer 2025, 1–13; Zimmerling 2007, 268–77; Tausend 2010, 33–53). This topic is covered in Old Testament exegesis, but only one article has been published that explicitly deals with the issues using the Synoptic Gospels as an example (Stare and Hasitschka 2024, 73–90; cf. further reflections from pastoral psychology on the abuse of power: Kießling 2024, 171–82). Other theological disciplines are more interested in reflecting the problem (Grümme 2021).

The classical term which expresses power in the New Testament writings is ἐξουσία. It comprises the following nuances of meaning: authority to rule; jurisdiction, the sphere of authority; symbol of authority; ruler; control; (supernatural) power; right to judge.[2] A second term is δύναμις, which can mean ability, to perform an activity; power; mighty deed, miracle; human ruler; supernatural power; meaning. Power is connected with the omnipotence of God and his son, Jesus Christ (Dietrich 2006).

It seems that it is quite simple to find technical terms for power in the Greek Bible. But does the Bible define abuse of power? Where does it occur in the New Testament writings? However, there is no specific term in the Bible for 'abuse' or 'to abuse,' even though the problem is well known. It is therefore necessary, for the following considerations, to define what is meant by 'abuse of power' (which is a modern term whilst the phenomenon is old).

What? – Abuse of power is an attempt to hierarchically demean the other person, to deprive them of their dignity, and to damage their reputation and self-esteem. This can go as far as the destruction of the other person or group of people. Individuals or groups can perpetrate abuse of power. In the latter case, it may also be referred to as bullying or harassing. For individuals to abuse power, they need bystanders who silently consent. Abuse of power is a concealed, calculated, and destructive game designed to eliminate anyone who challenges one's own values and power.

Where? – Abuse of power is often seen in highly hierarchical systems characterised by relationships of dependency, as well as in competitive situations among peers. It is often an attempt to eliminate all competition.

How? – Abuse of power manifests itself through communication breakdowns: a refusal to engage in dialogue (because there is no counter-argument), a failure

---

[2] According to James Swanson (1997). Louw and Nida classify the term ἐξουσία under the categories 37.35-38.13; 76.12; 12.44; 30.122.

to pass on necessary information, talking over one another (sometimes in the presence of the person concerned), often condemning is a foregone conclusion, unwilling to change the own minds or set aside prejudices, and finally isolating of an individual or group in everyday life. Any form of discrimination, or speaking disparagingly about a person in their absence or presence (gossiping), is an expression of an abuse of power, in which the perpetrator considers themselves superior and verbally humiliates the other person. Abuse of power is not only evident in (non-)verbal communication. Perpetrators are guilty in their thoughts, words and deeds (cf. the confession of sins during the Holy Mass): frequently and unfortunately, these words are followed by decisions and actions that make the victim's life difficult and impossible. Abuse of power can also lead to a claim to sole authority over the interpretation of texts and/or events.

Why? – The psychological disposition of abusers is always characterised by weakness and inadequacy, which they overcompensate for through power--seeking behaviour. Victims often become a projection screen for the perpetrators' faults and weaknesses (victim blaming). Victims are assigned (shared) blame to justify the perpetrators' behaviour. We will discuss René Girard's scapegoat theory later.

Effects? – The abuse of power has spiritual (disregard for personal freedom and spiritual), theological (one-sided views of God and humanity, a pessimistic worldview and an elitist understanding of the Church, severe narrowing of the spirit), social, psychological and physical dimensions (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2023, 15). Ultimately, an abuse of power permanently damages a relationship of trust. Apologies from perpetrators can come across as self-promotion, which can serve to consolidate their power. This makes reconciliation between the victim and perpetrator more difficult. (Weak) Perpetrators find it difficult to be guided towards changing their behaviour, as their emotional immaturity and the tendency to project their own problems onto the victim make it almost impossible for them to step out of their role. For 'victims' to emerge unscathed from the power struggle, they must understand the 'game' and always be able to distinguish between themselves and the perpetrator. They must be mentally strong and free. If they can adopt an observant, analytical stance, they gain emotional distance from the perpetrator and can act more freely. Very few people have this ideal constitution. Prevention training and protective measures are therefore urgently needed.

II. EXAMPLES FROM NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

When examining the following New Testament texts in relation to the theme of abuse of power, it must first be made clear that this theme is not the New Testament authors' primary concern (see also the introduction in which my intentions are stated). Furthermore, the utmost restraint must be exercised when considering the motivations and psychological profiles of the perpetrators and victims, as although we are dealing with historical figures, they have been heavily fictionalised for literary effect.

The following article is limited to texts of the New Testament writings and can only cover a selection of topics. Given the richness of the writings in question, only a few examples can be highlighted here. A comprehensive study of New Testament writings on the subject of the abuse of power is a gap in the research.

In the first section, Jesus's conflicts with his opponents are analysed in light of this question. The Gospel of Mark, with its Galilean (Mk 2:1–12; 2:13–17; 2:18–22; 2:23–28; 3:1–6) and Jerusalem controversies, serves as the textual basis for this analysis. In a second step, Jesus's Passion according to John, and in particular Jesus's trial before Pilate, will be examined in detail (Kowalski 2022, 40–61). Finally, we turn our attention to Paul, whose life, from the moment of his conversion by the Risen One, was marked by tremendous opposition at every stage (Kowalski 2003, 387–410). At the same time, his letters contain a language of violence (Janssen 2024, 145–65; Gager and Leigh 2005, 13–21).

Our questions are twofold: What are the perpetrator's strategies for exercising power? And how does Jesus deal with the abuse of power by his opponents? Ultimately, the question is whether the abuse of power leads to success and thus to the destruction of the individual – and, of course, what potential victims can learn from Jesus's attitude in order to protect themselves from the destructive actions of perpetrators. This will be the point of interface for the pastoral implications, the application of the biblical texts to the present day.

In all considerations, it should be borne in mind that there is no such thing as communication between people that is free from power relations (Habermas 1981).

1. POWER AND THE ABUSE OF POWER IN THE GALILEAN CONTROVERSIES

From the very start of his ministry, the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus rushing restlessly from one conflict to the next (see Horsley 2011). He leaves no stone unturned. This literary device forms part of his theology of the cross: Mark can be understood as a Passion narrative with a lengthy introduction. The focus of the

following is on the interactions between Jesus and his opponents. In terms of methodology, the analysis of figures is applied (Finnern and Rüggemeier 2016, 195–210). Attention will be given to the character list, the character trait+s and conception, character dynamics, and the connection between characters and plot. The approach is both text-oriented and recipient-oriented.

Where can abuse of power be identified? How do the person or people affected deal with this? In any attempt to interpret the Gospel of Mark from this perspective, it must be borne in mind that some of Jesus's statements and actions exacerbate the conflict and, due to the narrative strategy employed in the Gospel of Mark, do not resolve the issue of the abuse of power.[3] In order to express power, Mark is only using the term ἐξουσία (1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15); δύναμις is missing.

The first account of a conflict is the healing of the paralysed man in Mk 2:1–12. On the one hand, there are groups of people who want to hear Jesus preach. In addition, four men come and bring a paralysed man to him. It is not until v. 6 that Mark mentions that scribes are also present. According to modern definitions, their behaviour fits the profile of abusers: They appear as a close-knit group. They do not (at first) speak to Jesus, but communicate non-verbally in their thoughts (hearts): "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (v. 8).[4] They judge and condemn Jesus for blasphemy without engaging in dialogue with him. Their intention is thus immediately clear: they claim for themselves the sole authority to interpret Jewish law. Furthermore, they silence any competition. They set themselves up as the standard for biblical interpretation and act self-righteously towards everyone else present.

Jesus's response reveals his authority to handle the situation as he sees fit. He brings the hidden dynamics of the interaction into the open and confronts his opponents with their behaviour. The deeper reason for this is that Jesus has the gift of seeing into the hearts of his opponents through his Spirit (v. 8). He proves himself to be Spirit-filled and a keen judge of character. His reply to the scribes also reveals his wisdom: he responds with a rhetorical question in which he presents two alternatives: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'?" Mark explains the reason for his confident demeanour in v. 10: as the Son of Man, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.

The second account of a conflict follows in 2:13–17. Jesus sits at the table in Levi's house, the former tax collector, whom he called to be his disciple. Mark describes how Jesus is sitting between two groups of people who are hostile

---

[3] Julia Pape, doctoral student of Wolfgang Grünstäudl (Münster), takes a critical look at the theme of Jesus's obedience in Mark's Gospel. According to her observations, it is not exemplary behaviour that prevents the abuse of power.

[4] All Bible quotations are taken from the *Revised Standard Version*.

towards one another: on one side are tax collectors and sinners, and on the other are the scribes and Pharisees. Both groups have different expectations towards Jesus: one group seeks help and salvation, the other grounds for condemning Jesus. The following communication does not proceed with transparency. The scribes and Pharisees say with indignation to Jesus's disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (v. 16). They refuse to engage in direct dialogue with Jesus and seek a three-way communication, because as far as they are concerned, Jesus's condemnation is already a foregone conclusion. There is no reason for them to turn to Jesus, because they are unwilling to change their minds or set aside their prejudices. This form of communication is an expression of an abuse of power: it amounts to refusing to engage in dialogue while talking about someone present. Jesus responds with confidence and clarity. He addresses his opponents directly and confronts them with his mission: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 17). Jesus thus presents himself as a physician who is responsible for the sick. However, the response leaves open as to who exactly are 'the sick,' 'the righteous' and 'sinners.' Jesus's communication is thus clear, yet also open and non-judgmental.

The next conflict story follows immediately in 2:23–28. Here, an open confrontation arises between the Pharisees and Jesus over the Sabbath laws. Jesus counters this with a biblical argument and his ethical principle: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (vv. 27–28). Once again, his communication is clear and open, non-judgmental, yet unambiguous. In this way, he stands up for the vulnerable. His authority as the Son of Man is emphasised. Unfortunately, the text does not tell us how Jesus's opponents reacted.

The final major conflict follows immediately afterwards: 3:1–6. Once again, the focus is on the Sabbath law. Jesus's opponents, who are not named until the end of v. 6, act deliberately: "to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him." Abuse of power is a concealed, calculated, and destructive game designed to eliminate anyone who challenges one's own values and power. The Markan Jesus does not allow this hidden motive to deter him. Instead, he heals and responds to his opponents with a question that represents the highest art of literature and communication: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" In this rhetorical question, two options are set in contrast to one another: to do good or to do evil – to save life or to kill. Any reasonable person can only give one answer: doing good and saving lives is always preferable to doing evil and taking lives. The Sabbath law takes a back seat for the sake of humanity.

In this communication situation, Jesus is portrayed as someone who finds himself caught between the needs of the person in need and his opponents. In this

arena of tension, he once again takes the side of the weak. At the same time, he avoids an open conflict with his opponents by posing a rhetorical question that gives them the opportunity to reconsider their stance. According to Mk 3:1–6, his communication remains inviting, constructive and inclusive, without compromising his position.

The fact that the Pharisees and Herodians then leave the scene in silence and resolve to kill him (v. 6) can be understood as another refusal to engage in dialogue, as they have no valid argument to counter his words. Mark describes Jesus's opponents with very negative terms. Their behaviour lays bare the full extent of their abuse of power: they act as a united front against an individual, refuse to engage in dialogue, remain entrenched in their position, and sentence their hated opponent to death without cause for prosecution, the right to a defence, or a fair trial. According to the rules of non-violent communication, the refusal to engage in dialogue and/or acting as a group are the key recurring features in situations involving abuse of power. The story of the healing of the man with the withered hand clearly illustrates the extent to which power can be abused. It can go as far as the destruction of a person, which cannot be justified by any objective argument. Abuse of power disregards all legal safeguards and, in a self-righteous manner, claims the sole right to judge and condemn a person.

2. POWER AND THE ABUSE OF POWER IN JESUS'S PASSION ACCORDING TO JOHN

The Passion of Jesus is the ultimate example of the abuse of power. All the legal principles of a fair trial are being disregarded. The questioning before Pilate in the Gospel of John is the most narratively developed passage, and it forms the basis for the following reflections (Kowalski 2022).

A court trial normally involves an indictment setting out the charges, the public reading of the charges, and the opportunity for the defendant to respond. A defendant has the right to have a lawyer by their side. A conviction is based on proven evidence. The sentence is in accordance with the verdict and the law. To put it bluntly: these elements are missing from Jesus's interrogation before Pilate.

Jesus's questioning before Pilate, John 18:28–19:16, lists various and contradictory charges.[5] Some of these are generalisations (18:30) or make it clear that rivalry is the reason for the accusation (18:33, 37; 19:3, 14, 15). Furthermore, blasphemy is cited, which cannot be a charge before the Roman court (19:7). The worst, however, is accusation without any factual basis and against one's better judgment (18:31; 19:6; 19:15). This raises the question of the motivation behind this approach.

[5] The term ἐξουσία is used twice (19:10, 11), whereas δύναμις is missing.

On the one hand, Pilate's political calculation is worth noting (19:12). This statement is highly manipulative in its communication, as it seeks to influence Pilate's decision without any objective basis. On the other hand, Pilate employs conflict-avoidance strategies, which are expressed primarily through rhetorical questions (18:35, 38). Ultimately, Pilate acts on his own, without consulting anyone and against his better judgment (18:38; 19:4, 6).

Pilate is described as an ambivalent figure who compensates for his weakness with a thirst for political power. He is ruled by his desires rather than being free to make rational decisions. He feels pressured by the crowd and the confrontation with Jesus, desperate or harried. His fear, his need to make an impression, or his own unrealistic expectations drive him to act. The result is violent communication, which is in itself an abuse of power. Pilate accuses, condemns, publicly humiliates with his words, acts out of fear (19:8: μᾶλλον ἐφοβήθη), uses political rhetoric, asks leading questions, acts against his reason and conscience, leaves the decision in the hands of others and avoids confrontation. Aggressive communication can also be accompanied by violence. An example is the official of the high priest who reacts with anger (18:22).

The scapegoat theory provides a good explanation for Jesus's condemnation: according to René Girard, rivalry arises when two people desire the same object. To end the conflict, a group instinctively unites against a randomly selected victim (the scapegoat), who is blamed for the crisis. This includes lies and violence, unfounded allegations. Abuse of power is a universal gathering of all against one (finally, the one victim, Jesus, will save them all). All characters are drawn into the maelstrom of conflict.

Jesus remains composed in the face of abuse of power as John underlines his sovereignty. Thus, his communication is portrayed as transparent; he listens even when faced with opposing views, embodies authenticity, and shares power rather than exercising it over others. He cares for his disciples even in the face of his Passion, clarifies concepts and ideas, provides clarity regarding their own identity and mission, and maintains calm and silence. The Johannine Jesus does not justify himself, does not seek revenge, does not condemn nor accuse, and offers unconditional love and empathy.

3. POWER AND THE ABUSE OF POWER AS REASON OF PAUL'S SUFFERING AS APOSTLE (2 COR 12)

First and foremost, it should be noted that Paul does not act on his own authority as the leading apostle. In Rom 1:1, he states it clearly that he is "set apart for the gospel of God", for preaching the gospel. But for Paul, this means that he does not choose his life's calling himself; according to his own words: he is chosen and can only accept or refuse God's call. Nevertheless, Paul must

constantly prove his legitimacy as an apostle to the churches (see 1 Cor 9:1: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?"). His entire life is marked by suffering and adversity; this is also recounted by Luke in his Acts of the Apostles, in accordance with Paul's epistles. In 2 Cor 11,21b–29, Paul shares his experiences of suffering as an apostle with the church in Corinth, where he had been publicly humiliated. These include "far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death" (v. 23).[6] He admits on several occasions that he is weak (2 Cor 11:21, 29, 30; 12:5, 9, 10). At the same time, it should be noted that, despite having experienced violence, Paul uncritically reproduces it in his language (e.g. Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ," cf. Gager and Gibson 2005, 13–21; Janssen 2024, 145–65). There is a tension between his self-presentation and his language. Despite the high level of theological reflection in his letters, his language remains rooted in the thinking of his time, in which violence played a central role. A similar pattern can be observed in his attitude towards slavery; he does not argue against its abolition, even though he speaks of the freedom and dignity of Christians.

These notes by Paul show that he is not endowed with absolute power and cannot act in an autocratic manner. Furthermore, they reveal him to be a man who reflects on his life and is able to assess it realistically. Someone who leads a community with these life experiences and skills has developed a high degree of empathy. Furthermore, the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's epistles reveal that Paul had a large team of co-workers. This included individuals – both men and women – as well as married couples. Paul was a team player. He presumably knew that without co-workers, he would not have been able to accomplish the great missionary work entrusted to him by the Risen One.

Leaders who share Paul's disposition are not tempted to abuse their power. Their self-image as servants of God, their dedication to their mission, their calling and, above all, their dedication to their daily duties are the best safeguards against the abuse of power. In their work with others, they are kept in check by their team members, who share their goals. Paul's 'formula for success' against the abuse of power is also the key to his character: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).[7] Paul lives entirely out of his relationship with Christ. When it comes to selecting church leaders, this means choosing only those who have been called by God. This requires careful discernment.

---

[6] Specifically, Paul lists: 5x the forty lashes less one (v. 24), 3x beaten with rods, 1x stoned (v. 25), 3x shipwrecked (v. 25), frequent journeys; in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people and Gentiles, in the city and in the wilderness, at sea, danger from false brethren (v. 26), toil and hardship, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold and exposure (v. 27), daily pressure for all the churches (v. 28).

[7] In 2 Cor 12:9 Paul uses twice δύναμις, whereas ἐξουσία is missing.

However, Paul repeatedly encounters abuses of power: by members of the church (particularly in Corinth), by the synagogue communities and by political authorities. He must keep setting out, leaving places behind, enduring suffering and committing himself to Christ. Every instance of abuse of power he experiences leads him to a deeper faith. This is only possible if a person is mentally stable and strong, with a strength that is a gift of God's grace. Paul is certainly an extraordinary figure, the likes of whom one does not often come across. That is why training and protective measures are needed within the Church.

4. SEPARATION OF POWERS THROUGH SYNODAL STRUCTURES

The Acts of the Apostles recounts the origins of the early Church. Part of Luke's narrative approach is to identify conflicts at all levels (external, internal, and interpersonal conflicts) within early Christianity,[8] whilst presenting idealised conflict-resolution strategies that fit within its concept of salvation history: conflicts promote the universal spread of the Church (Kowalski 2026, forthcoming). Part of this idealisation is Luke's ecclesiological ideal, 'communion of love.' It is a concept that is developed narratively in Acts 2:42–47 and, in particular, in 4:32–37.

Here, only one text can be observed. A prime example par excellence of synodal structures is the Council of the Apostles in Acts 15.[9] The trigger is the fact that non-Jews are also converting to Christianity. This raises the question for the missionaries of the conditions for admission to baptism. Must these people first become Jewish (observance of the Torah, circumcision), or are there other ways to enter Christianity? What consequences does the resulting diversity have for the group's identity?

Luke's conflict resolution strategy comprises the following steps: 1. Identifying the problem; 2. Convening a plenary assembly of all the apostles in Jerusalem; 3. Synodal deliberation; 4. Joint decision-making; 5. Recording the decisions in writing. This approach is described in idealistic terms, but it is one worth copying.

5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The examples from the New Testament have shown that mechanisms of abuse of power include refusing to engage in dialogue and acting in groups. René Girard's scapegoat theory is a great help to understand the mechanisms

---

[8] Multiculturalism, ethnic diversity and differing pathways to the Christian faith have been a source of tension within early Christianity from the very beginning. Added to this are the painful processes of separation that Jews and Christians have endured. The sociological minority of Christians also had to contend with struggles under the respective political authorities.

[9] Luke does neither use ἐξουσία, nor δύναμις.

of abuse of power (Schwager, Peter, and Moosbrugger 2016).[10] According to him, people do not desire things autonomously, but rather imitate the desires of others. When two people desire the same object, rivalry inevitably arises. Envy, with its destructive effect on human relationships, is also worth mentioning in this context. To end a conflict, a group instinctively unites against a randomly selected victim (the scapegoat), who is blamed for the crisis. The killing or expulsion of this victim brings short-term peace. The following are involved in the perpetrator's process: lies and violence; unfounded accusations and irrational violence are contagious; desire as a central element of human behaviour; a universal gathering of all against one; all characters are drawn into the maelstrom of conflict.

III. PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Abuse of power is a phenomenon that has been observed since the beginnings of Christianity – even within the movement of Jesus himself. It seems to be part of human nature, including that of Christians. Neither Jesus's disciples nor his declared opponents can escape the pull of the negative. Since human beings are by nature weak and sinful, abuse of power will always be a part of human history. This makes it all the more important to raise awareness of this phenomenon and to offer training programs to mitigate the destructive consequences of the abuse of power. The Church(es), given their vulnerability as hierarchical systems and their role as role models for society, have a particularly important responsibility in this regard.

The following reflections present suggestions for pastoral training programs (incorporating pastoral-psychological approaches) designed to prevent the abuse of power as much as possible. It is important to keep in mind that the success of training programs depends not only on the curriculum and the instructors, but above all on the willingness of the trainees.

In addition to psychological screening, which is becoming increasingly established (in the pastoral field), training in non-violent communication[11] is re-

---

10 Raymund Schwager applies René Girard's scapegoat theory to biblical texts.

11 Examples of violent communication are: behaviours that lead to hurt or harm; judging or blaming others; bullying; scapegoating; spreading gossip; speaking badly of others; racist prejudices; assigning blame; pointing the finger at someone; discriminating; talking without listening; criticising others or ourselves; insults; reacting out of anger; using political rhetoric; being defensive (defending oneself) or judging who is 'good/bad' or what is 'right/wrong' (to admonish and judge someone without a hearing).The following aspects need to be added to the reports on the sexual abuse of children within the Church: repression, denial of reality, the monopolisation of the authority to interpret the fact, the inability to engage in dialogue, an unwillingness to engage in dialogue, a reluctance to learn, the use of higher authorities to secure one's own (weak)

commended. It is more an attitude rather than a method (principles that support a life full of compassion, collaboration, courage and authenticity). Non-violent language comprises understanding how words can foster connection or create distance. Communication means first and foremost to know how to ask for what you want, how to listen to others even when there are differences of opinion, and how to find solutions that work for everyone. This must be regularly practised and reviewed. This requires a willingness to learn and a change of attitude on the part of everyone involved. It requires emotional maturity. Any shortcomings become apparent during communication training and can be addressed.

What role can the Bible play in this context? Biblical texts can serve as a mirror and a corrective for one's own behaviour. Ignatian biblical interpretation offers a reliable and hermeneutically appropriate method for this purpose, one that is closely aligned with narrative methods of exegesis, including character analysis. The sample texts presented above are only a selection that can be expanded upon.

Furthermore, synodal structures can prevent the abuse of power. Sharing power with others rather than exercising power over others enables full participation by everyone involved. They allow people to draw on their skills and talents to solve complex problems and tackle challenging tasks. The less hierarchical the structure, and the more active participation is possible, the less likely individuals are to abuse their power.

What role can the Bible play in this context? In particular, the Book of Acts – which, with its (admittedly idealised) conflict-resolution strategies, points to synodal structures and communal decision-making – can be consulted. It is important, however, that synodal structures be enshrined in both canon law and labour law to ensure the highest degree of reliability and effectiveness.

Another key area is leadership. People in leadership roles must be selected on the basis of their leadership qualities and personality traits. They should also be made aware of the following attitudes required of leaders. According to Bénédicte Lemmelijn (Dean of the Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven) they should pay attention to: 1. receptive observation and open-minded listening, 2. broad and intense participatory analysis and decision-making, 3. acting truthfully, authentically and with integrity, 4. transparent communication (Lemmelijn 2022; Marte 2023). Abuse of power is prevented when leaders adopt a participatory style of collaboration and practise respectful, transparent communication. This requires mature individuals who give their fellow human beings the space to flourish.

---

position of power, and finally, silencing people to cover up one's own guilt. These are defence (self-protection) mechanisms employed by individual perpetrators who hide behind their institution and use its strength to compensate for their own weaknesses. The term 'institutional protection' does not adequately capture the situation.

What role can the Bible play in this context? Biblical texts also offer insights into leadership competence. There are both positive and negative examples in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. From the words of Jesus himself, we can develop a profile of the qualities required for good leadership in the Christian, Jesus-centred sense: humility – a life lived in relationship with God, to whom we owe our very existence – would therefore also be a helpful remedy against hierarchical arrogance.

A clear sense of one's own identity, healthy self-esteem and a high degree of empathy are essential qualities for people in leadership roles. A system of division of powers and oversight procedures for those in senior management positions must be introduced. This requirement (strong social skills) should be included in every job advertisement. The separation of powers and the prohibition of the accumulation of offices are safeguards designed to limit the power of individuals. The selection of qualified and authentic individuals of good character, with mental stability and a caring nature, for leadership roles in which they lead by listening, should be standard.

SUMMARY

Abuse of power is a pressing issue today. In a world increasingly ruled by autocrats, the Church must develop a counter-narrative and a model to follow. Prevention training, structural changes (synodal structures, separation of powers) and the careful selection of leaders are essential in this regard. Studying and meditating on the Holy Scriptures can be of great help in reflecting on one's own behaviour and aligning it with the example of Jesus.

However, it must always be borne in mind that the historical Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels in a stylised literary form, and that Jesus's behaviour must not be applied directly to current situations. His silence in the face of certain situations involving the abuse of power – for literary reasons (in Mark, John, etc.) – is not something to be emulated when faced with blatant injustice and abuse within the Church. In each case, a clear distinction must be made regarding how to communicate to put an end to abuse and protect victims. Furthermore, an appropriate biblical hermeneutic of contextualisation is required (Bieringer 2010).

The most important reason for preventing the abuse of power is to ensure that people can live together with dignity and have unhindered access to God.

NADUŻYWANIE WŁADZY W NOWYM TESTAMENCIE. IMPLIKACJE DUSZPASTERSKIE DLA PROGRAMÓW SZKOLENIOWYCH

Abstrakt

Nadużywanie władzy w Kościele, polityce i społeczeństwie to paląca kwestia. Jak dotąd nie została ona jeszcze szeroko omówiona w literaturze teologicznej. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizujemy przykłady nadużywania władzy w Nowym Testamencie. Jako przykład najpierw przeanalizujemy kontrowersje galilejskie w Ewangelii według św. Marka, skupiając się na konstelacji postaci i komunikacji (nie)werbalnej. Celem jest podkreślenie nadużywania władzy wynikającego ze słabej komunikacji między poszczególnymi postaciami i grupami. Drugim wybranym przykładem jest przesłuchanie Jezusa przed Piłatem w Pasji według św. Jana. Dostarcza ono bogatego materiału zarówno do analizy komunikacji agresywnej, jak i pokojowej. Celem jest wykazanie, że metoda komunikacji pokojowej stanowi konstruktywną odpowiedź na nadużywanie władzy. Następnie w tekście przeanalizowane zostanie cierpienie Pawła z rąk struktur władzy. Na koniec przedstawiono struktury synodalne opisane w Dziejach Apostolskich, które oferują wyjście ze strukturalnie zakorzenionego nadużycia władzy. Niestety, dotychczasowa literatura na ten temat jest bardzo ograniczona. Po zdefiniowaniu terminu przedstawione zostaną przykłady, a artykuł zakończy się refleksjami na temat duszpasterskich implikacji tego zagadnienia.

S ł o w a k l u c z o w e : nadużycie władzy, komunikacja, konflikt, władza.

ABUSE OF POWER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SENSITIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS

Abstract

The abuse of power in the Church, politics and society is a pressing issue. To date, it has not yet been extensively addressed in theological scholarship. This article will examine examples of the abuse of power in the New Testament. As an example, we will first analyse the Galilean Controversies in the Gospel of Mark focusing on the constellation of characters and (non-)verbal communication. The aim is to highlight the abuse of power resulting from poor communication between individual characters and groups. The second example chosen is Jesus's interrogation before Pilate in John's Passion. It provides ample material for both aggressive and non-violent communication. The aim is to demonstrate that the method of non-violent communication represents a constructive response to the abuse of power. The text then examines Paul's suffering at the hands of power structures. Finally, it presents the synodal structures described in Acts, which offer a way out of structurally rooted abuse of power. Unfortunately, the body of existing literature on the subject is very limited. Following a definition of the term, examples will be presented, and the article will conclude with reflections on the pastoral implications of the topic.

K e y w o r d s : abuse of power, communication, conflict, power.

MACHTMISSBRAUCH IM NEUEN TESTAMENT.
PASTORALE IMPLIKATIONEN FÜR PRÄVENTIONSSCHULUNGEN

Abstrakt

Machtmissbrauch in Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft ist ein drängendes Thema. Bislang wurde er in der theologischen Forschung noch nicht umfassend behandelt. Dieser Artikel untersucht Beispiele für Machtmissbrauch im Neuen Testament. Als Beispiel werden wir zunächst die galiläischen Kontroversen im Markusevangelium analysieren und uns dabei auf die Figurenkonstellation und die (non-)verbale Kommunikation konzentrieren. Ziel ist es, den Machtmissbrauch aufzuzeigen, der aus der mangelhaften Kommunikation zwischen einzelnen Figuren und Gruppen resultiert. Als zweites Beispiel dient die Vernehmung Jesu vor Pilatus in der Johannespassion. Sie bietet reichlich Material sowohl für aggressive als auch für gewaltfreie Kommunikation. Ziel ist es, aufzuzeigen, dass die Methode der gewaltfreien Kommunikation eine konstruktive Antwort auf Machtmissbrauch darstellt. Anschließend untersucht der Text das Leiden des Paulus unter Machtstrukturen. Schließlich werden die in der Apostelgeschichte beschriebenen synodalen Strukturen vorgestellt, die einen Ausweg aus dem strukturell verankerten Machtmissbrauch bieten. Leider ist die vorhandene Literatur zu diesem Thema sehr begrenzt. Nach einer Definition des Begriffs werden Beispiele vorgestellt, und der Artikel schließt mit Überlegungen zu den pastoralen Implikationen des Themas.

S c h l ü s s e l w ö r t e r : Machtmissbrauch, Kommunikation, Konflikt, Macht.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bieringer, Reimund, and Mary Elsbernd. 2010. *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*. Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia 61. Leuven: Peeters.

Deutsche Bischofskonferenz. 2023. Arbeitshilfe 338. *Missbrauch geistlicher Autorität. Zum Umgang mit Geistlichem Missbrauch*. Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz.

Dietrich, Walter. 2006. “Art. Allmacht Gottes.” Accessed June 27, 2026. https://www.die-bibel.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/staerke-at.

Eck, Joachim. 2018. “Divine Strategies Against Abuse of Power in the Opening of the Book of Isaiah and the Exodus Story. Some Aspects Where Micah Is Not Similar to Isaiah.” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130:4–25.

Ernst, Stephanie. 2018. “Art. Stärke (AT).” Accessed June 27, 2026. https://www.die-bibel.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/staerke-at.

Finnern, Sönke, Jan Rüggemeier, and Lara Mührenberg. 2016. *Methoden der neutestamentlichen Exegese. Eine Einführung für Studium und Lehre*. Stuttgart: UTB GmbH A. Francke.

Gager, John G., and E. Leigh Gibson. 2005. "Violent Acts and Violent Language in the Apostle Paul." In *Violence in the New Testament*, edited by Shelly Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson, 13–21. New York – London: Bloomsbury.

Grümme, Bernhard. 2021. "Art. Macht." Accessed June 27, 2026. https://www.die-bibel.de/ressourcen/wirelex/9-politische-und-rechtliche-dimensionen-religioeser-bildung/macht.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Vol. 1: *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*. Vol. 2: *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Horsley, Richard A. 2011. *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Janssen, Claudia. 2024. "Gewalt und Mittäterschaft. Röm 1,28–32 als Spiegel einer gewalttätigen Gesellschaft." In *Von Gott reden in einer Welt der Gewalt. Biblische und heutige Perspektiven*, edited by Rainer Kessler and Dirk Sager, 145–65. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Kießling, Klaus. 2024. "Die Weltgerichtsrede (Mt 25,31–46) im Angesicht von Machtmissbrauch." In *Zur Sprache bringen. Biblische Texte und sexualisierte Gewalt in Pastoral und Schule*, edited by Andreas Heek, Aurica Jax, Ilse Müllner, and Annegret Reese-Schnitker, 171–82. Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald.

Kowalski, Beate. 2003. "Widerstände, Visionen und Geistführung bei Paulus." *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 125:387–410.

Kowalski, Beate. 2022. "A Character Study of Pontius Pilate according to John 18:28–19:16a. About Power Strategies and the Abuse of Power." *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 12:40–61.

Kowalski, Beate. 2026. "Identitätsbildung durch Konfliktbewältigung in der Apg." In *Doppelwerk. Hermeneutische, exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Zugänge zu Lukasevangelium und Apostelgeschichte*. FS Knut Backhaus and Gerd Häfner, edited by Gudrun Nassauer, Stephan Witetschek, Hans-Georg Gradl, Maria Lang, and Cedric Büchner. Tübingen: WUNT (accepted for publication, forthcoming).

Lemmelijn, Bénédicte. 2022. "New Wind in Our Sails. A Tide for Turning, A Time for Hope." Accessed June 27, 2026. https://7ae7a39fe5.clvaw-cdnwnd.com/d400d733ecb3fcec384a7e574b341433/200000059-6575a6575b/Vision%20Text%20%20EN%20Lemmelijn.pdf?ph=7ae7a39fe5.

Marte SJ, Christian. 2023. "If you want to lead well, you have to ask good questions." Accessed June 27, 2026. https://christianmarte.org/2023/12/15/if-you-want-to-lead--well-you-have-to-ask-good-questions/.

Nida, Eugene A., and Johannes P. Louw. 1992. *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament. A Supplement to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

Paganini, Simone. 2024. "Machtmissbrauch in der Hebräischen Bibel als Zerstörung zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen." In *Religion. Macht. Strukturen. Missbrauch*, edited by Ursula Schattner-Rieser and Wilhelm Rees, 19–68. Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.

Peetz, Melanie. 2024. "Über Macht, Machtausübung und Machtmissbrauch. David und die Frauen." *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 111:26–9.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Accessed June 27, 2026. https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Revised-Standard-Version-RSV-Bible/.

Schwager, Raymund, Karin Peter, and Mathias Moosbrugger. 2016. *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock? Gewalt und Erlösung in den biblischen Schriften*. Gesammelte Schriften 2. Freiburg: Herder.

Spielman, Larry W. 1999. "David's Abuse of Power." *Word & World* 19:251–59.

Stare, Mira, and Martin Hasitschka. 2024. "Macht und Machtmissbrauch in den synoptischen Evangelien." In *Religion. Macht. Strukturen. Missbrauch*, edited by Ursula Schattner-Rieser and Wilhelm Rees, 73–90. Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.

Stiebert, Johanna. 2003. "Human Suffering and Divine Abuse of Power in Lamentations. Reflections on Forgiveness in the Context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Process." *Pacifica* 16:195–215.

Swanson, James. 1997. *A Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains. Greek New Testament* (electronic lexicon, published by Logos).

Tausend, Sabine. 2010. "Macht der Frauen – Macht durch Frauen. Die Frauen der Triumvirn." In *Geschlechterverhältnisse und Macht. Geschlechterverhältnisse und Macht. Lebensformen in der Zeit des frühen Christentums*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer and Christoph Heil, 33–53. Exegese in unserer Zeit 21. Wien: Lit.

Timmer, Daniel C. 2014. "The Use and Abuse of Power in Amos. Identity and Ideology." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39:101–18.

Wacker, Marie-Theres. 2017. "The Violence of Power and the Power of Violence. Hybrid, Contextual Perspectives on the Book of Esther." In *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible. Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, edited by L. Juliana M. Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, 99–115. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies. London: Bloomsbury.

Westermeyer, Lara. 2025. "Machterfahrungen in Psalm 129. Leibliche Lektüreperspektive." *Protokolle zur Bibel* 34:1–13.

Zimmerling, Peter. 2007. "Mächte und Gewalten und die Macht Jesu Christi." *Una Sancta* 62:268–77.

Beate Kowalski – Doctor of Catholic Theology: New Testament Exegesis (Ruhr University Bochum 1995); Habilitation: New Testament Studies (Leopold Franzens University 2003). Student Assistant (Research Centre "Fontes Christiani", Faculty of Catholic Theology, Ruhr-University Bochum 1989–1990); Research Assistant (Research Centre "Institut für franziskanische Geschichte" 1989–1990); Research Assistant (Chair of Exegesis and Theology of the New Testament, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Ruhr-University Bochum 1990–1995); Diocesan Officer in the Archdiocese of Paderborn (1995–2000); Research Assistant and Junior Fellow (Faculty of Theology, Catholic University of Louvain 2000–2002); Post-doc Scholarship of the University of Passau (2002–2003); Temporary Chair Representative of Exegesis and Theology of the New Testament (Faculty of Theology Paderborn 2003–2004); Terence Albert O'Brien Chair of

Biblical Studies (Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick 2004–2006); Professor of Exegesis and Theology of the New Testament, University of Koblenz-Landau, Campus Koblenz (2006–2008); Professor of Exegesis and Theology of the New Testament (TU Dortmund University since 2008); Voluntary Pastoral Ministry: funeral prayer services; communion for the sick (Pastoraler Raum im Dortmunder Süden since 2024); Author of monographs: *Die Hirtenrede (Joh 10,1-18) im Kontext des Johannesevangeliums* (Stuttgart 1996); *Die Rezeption des Propheten Ezechiel in der Offenbarung des Johannes* (Stuttgart 2004); *„Unsere Trauer wandelst Du in Freude" – Hilfen für Totengebet und Begräbnisfeiern* (Stuttgart 1996). Co-author of monographs: *„Trauernde trösten – Tote beerdigen" – Biblische, pastorale und liturgische Hilfen bei Sterben und Tod* (Stuttgart 1997); *„Sammle meine Tränen in einem Krug" – Predigten und Meditationen zu Psalmen für Begräbnisfeiern* (Stuttgart 2000); *Studien zu Einleitungsfragen und zur Theologie und Exegese des Neuen Testaments. Gesammelte Aufsätze von Peter Dschulnigg* (Leuven 2010); *Handeln verantworten. Grundlagen – Kriterien – Kompetenzen* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2010); *„Er wischt die Tränen ab von jedem Gesicht" – Predigten und pastorale Hilfen für Begräbnisfeiern* (Stuttgart 2011); *„Denn wo du hingehst, will auch ich hingehen…" Biblische Erzählfiguren als Handlungsmodelle – Bibelkatechetische Arbeitshilfen* (Stuttgart 2012); *Kirche werden durch Aufbruch und Wagnis – Erzählfiguren in der Apostelgeschichte als Handlungsmodelle – Katechetische Arbeitshilfen* (Stuttgart 2013); *Die Johannespassion von Arvo Pärt* (Stuttgart 2015); *Herausforderungen Interkultureller Theologie* (Paderborn 2016); *Reception of Exodus Motifs in Jewish and Christian Literature: „Let my people go!"* (Leiden 2021); *Reception of Exodus Motifs in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Writings* (Tübingen 2026); *Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World. An Intercultural-Biblical Response* (Leiden 2026 forthcoming).

Address for correspondence: Beate.Kowalski@tu-dortmund.de.