

# Educational Brief

## Between Two Ferns

### Boundary, Dismissal, and Power Dynamics in Faith-Based Leadership

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#### Introduction

When a pastor gives a sermon you deeply resonate with, and you share it with someone out of vulnerability and excitement, but that person responds with a statement such as, *“We’re not really church people,”* the statement can carry very different meanings depending on context, tone, and pattern.

Boundaries are healthy — we teach this.

At the same time, we want our followers to feel supported, and there may be more to this experience. So let’s talk about it.

This document distinguishes between:

- Healthy personal boundaries
- Emotional impact without abuse
- Subtle dismissal
- Strategic power maneuvers
- Relational aggression

Understanding these differences protects both the integrity of ministry and the emotional stability of our church.

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#### A Personal Boundary (Non-Abusive Conduct)

A statement such as *“We’re not really church people”* is not inherently abusive.

It may simply communicate:

- Religious identity
- Personal belief system
- Spiritual preference

- Comfort level with institutional faith
- A desire not to participate

Perhaps they are atheist — that's okay. We are interfaith and open-minded.

In this case, the statement functions as self-definition.

Healthy ministry must allow space for others to decline participation without imposing emotional penalties.

### **Indicators of a Boundary (Not Abuse)**

- Polite tone
- No mockery or shaming
- No interference with church operations
- No attempts to undermine leadership
- No repeated targeting

Emotional impact alone does not constitute abuse.

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### **Emotional Impact vs. Abuse**

Even when no abuse is present, founders may experience:

- Rejection
- Invalidation
- Feeling unseen
- Grief over lack of support

These feelings are real and worthy of processing.

Sometimes we feel discouraged when others do not share in our excitement. That is normal and human. We carry on.

However, abuse requires more than discomfort. It involves pattern, intent, and coercive behavior.

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### **When It Becomes Dismissal or Status Signaling**

The same phrase can take on a different meaning if delivered with:

- Contempt

- Superiority
- Public distancing
- Minimization of faith
- Intellectual condescension

## Examples of Status Maneuvering

- Framing faith as naïve or irrational
- Elevating one's own opinion as morally or intellectually superior
- Publicly signaling non-association to protect social status
- Strategically withholding endorsement

In these cases, the statement may function as **social dominance signaling**. If patterned, it may rise to relational aggression.

Very interesting dynamics can emerge here.

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## When It Crosses Into Harm

It may cross into harmful conduct if it includes:

- Mockery or ridicule
- Shaming language
- Repeated belittling
- Encouraging others to ostracize
- Sabotage of ministry efforts
- Undermining credibility
- Coordinated distancing to destabilize leadership

Pattern + intent + impact = potential abuse dynamic.

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## Power and the Founder

Power over a founder exists only if the founder requires:

- Validation
- Endorsement
- Participation

Healthy leadership rests in internal stability.

We are human. We work hard. We stay self respecting.

A grounded response:

“You are free not to be church people.  
We are free to build anyway.”

Ministry is always invitation — not coercion.

Strength is grounded in conviction, not consensus.

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## Discernment Questions for Leadership

1. Is this a one-time boundary or a repeated pattern?
2. Is the tone neutral, dismissive, or contemptuous?
3. Is there public signaling meant to weaken credibility?
4. Is there coordinated behavior suggesting relational aggression?
5. Am I reacting from wounded expectation or genuine targeting?

Understanding protects against both over-labeling and under-protecting.

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## Leadership Posture Moving Forward

Faith-based leaders serve best when they:

- Respect autonomy
- Maintain boundaries
- Refuse to shrink
- Do not chase validation
- Address real harassment firmly
- Release misaligned individuals peacefully

The goal is not to control perception, but to steward mission with integrity.

Our primary mission is to protect ourselves and our ministry.

We are also unique in that we intentionally study abusive language and power dynamics so that we may cultivate elevated forms of personal peace. It is structured work. It is difficult work. We are weeding through many “ferns,” but this process strengthens loving boundaries, mutual understanding, and personal resilience.