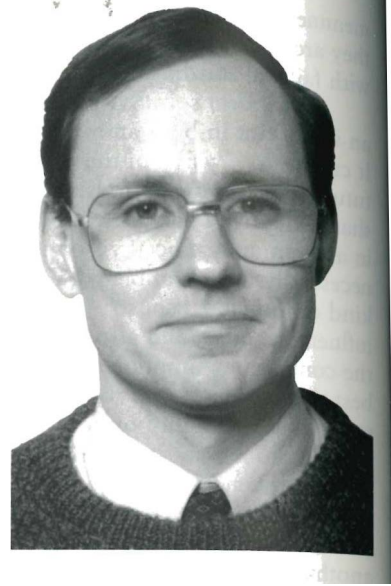


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# The person in authority

*by Christopher Sunderland*

*To be a leader is to have pure power. Humans in authority have an enduring tendency towards corruption. Accusations against those in power who abuse their authority are universal and widespread. Sometimes it seems that this goes with the territory. Those of us in leadership roles need to think through the implications of that position. There is a right way and the Bible has something to say, says Christopher Sunderland ...*

**O**ur newspapers present to us a never ending litany of accusations about the abuse of power. Ashcroft, Cresson, Aitken: these are a few of the leading names this year. A few people come to public attention, but issues about handling authority impinge on us all. Many of those who read this article will be in authority over others in some way, whether as Christian leaders, managers, schoolteachers, parents, supervisors of this or that, and will thereby suffer from similar temptations, because these temptations are common to all humanity.

Humans are social animals who work with hierarchies of power. This naturally gives rise to a massive variety of social groups all with their own structures of leadership. Some, such as political groups, are alliances centred on the acquisition of power itself. Others

are oriented around a social function like a police force, a company or a school. All have their leaders.

Leaders are, in one sense, people of pure power. They can act more freely than others; they can get things done.

On the other hand, these people are representative people. They represent the people they have power over and should properly be constrained by their responsibility to those people.

One principle underlies the actions of all representative people. They must be impartial towards those they represent. They can have no favourites among them, no siding with factions, no preference to friends, or they risk breaking the public trust which acknowledges and affirms them in their position.

This impartiality of representative people is so fundamental, it can even be

detected in primates. It turns out that chimpanzee colonies have “control males”, acting like the police among the colony and intervening in fights. Frans de Waal<sup>1</sup> has studied thousands of such interactions and found that the control male broke up fights impartially. Family, friends and powerful allies were deliberately not favoured. In fact the controller positively sided with the weaker disputant so as to restore balance and harmony to the colony. One chimp that did favour his own powerful allies was deposed. It is a strange story, and not so far from our human situation as we might think.

One of our human police was recently in the spotlight. Sir Paul Condon was accused of showing partiality. In particular, the force was accused of institutional racism. He nearly lost his job.

## Impartiality

If this impartiality is a basic principle of leadership, what does the Bible have to say about it? The words used to describe God in the Bible include such as “lord”, “king”, “law-giver”, “saviour”, “shepherd”, “father”. These all have one thing in common. They denote a person in authority. It turns out that God is understood in the Scriptures as the ideal type of the person in authority. There is much that is subtle and complex about the understanding of God’s authority<sup>2</sup>, but this principle is found throughout the Scripture: The people who understand themselves to be under God’s authority always expect God to act impartially towards them and this includes some deliberate favouring of the weak in the interests of justice and harmony.

The writer of Deuteronomy says, “The Lord your God is supreme over all gods and over all powers. He is great and mighty, and he is to be feared. He does not show partiality and does not accept bribes. He makes sure that orphans and widows are treated fairly; he loves the foreigners...”<sup>3</sup>

This is written self-consciously as a model for human authority. It is rather strange to think of God as not “accepting bribes”, but this phrase becomes understandable

if the main purpose of this description is to act as a vision for humans in authority.

A few chapters later we read instructions to judges, “They are not to be unjust or show partiality in their judgements; and they are not to accept bribes, for gifts blind the eyes even of honest and wise men and cause them to give wrong decisions”.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise in Job we see a beautiful picture of the just local judge who “delivered the poor when they cried and the fatherless who had none to help them” and who “caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy”<sup>5</sup>. Similar expectations are articulated with regard to Israel’s king.<sup>6</sup>

If this is the aim, what of the practice? How do humans actually behave in leadership?

The Bible shows us a very different story. Humans in authority have an enduring tendency towards corruption. At a deep level this can be understood as the inevitable conflict between the interests of the individual in power and their public responsibilities to those they serve. People have a natural self-interest. They will always be concerned for their individual reward and their status within the group and, given the opportunity, they will be tempted to exploit their position of power to foster their individual interest over against their public responsibility.

## Examples

In the Bible we see examples of David taking Bathsheeba and then using his power to have Uriah killed and cover his deed. Or we see Ahab conspiring to have Naboth killed in order to steal his vineyard. Such are the deeds of people in power.

We read similar stories in our newspapers daily. Ernest Saunders, in what was known as “the Guinness affair”, once transferred £5.2 million pounds through more than sixteen different banks to conceal the fact that £3 million of that finally ended up in his own account. He conspired with financiers across the world to buy Guinness shares totalling £257 million pounds in order artificially to boost their share price and enable the take-over of Distillers. In return, Saunders gave personal kickbacks of millions to each of his

fellow conspirators.<sup>7</sup> And he was found out.

In the Bible it was the role of the prophets, people like Nathan and Elijah, to cry out against this sort of corruption in the name of God. In our day it is the task of the “whistleblower”, the investigative journalist or whoever alights on the truth, to reveal it, expose the corruption and so restore public trust.

The experience of humans in authority points to the need for disciplines constraining those in power. The European Commission has been the focus for a number of serious incidents this year. Edith Cresson was shown to have appointed family and friends to top jobs in Europe. She denied having acted improperly. If they were the best people for the job, why not appoint them? The answer has to do with temptation. Edith Cresson had a duty to exercise her role impartially with respect to the people of Europe. Although she may be able to do this while working with family and friends, it is seen as all too easy for her to swing deals that may be in her or her friends’ interest rather than that of the wider public she serves.

By working with a diversity of people, who have no evident narrow interest, there is a proper challenge built into the system and the wider public interest is more easily preserved. Such disciplines are expounded in the Nolan report on standards in public life and, I believe, are evidently in tune with biblical teaching.

A proactive approach to such discipline would be for a person in authority deliberately to expose themselves to the diversity of public opinion about them and to regularly face those who felt excluded or unjustly treated. Abraham Lincoln set a good example here. He deliberately set aside time each week to, as he called it, “bathe himself in public opinion”. This meant inviting the public to criticise him and his policies, face to face, in conversation. He was shouted at, even spat at, but he was a better politician for it.

Jesus’ own model of being in authority is complicated by his being both the mediator of divine authority and representative of humankind at the same time. It is not obvious, for example, how much Jesus could be said to have needed the discipline provided by the criticism of others in the way that we do. Yet it is clear that

▶ Jesus did not flinch from public criticism. Encouraging and living a model of leadership based on servitude was implicitly to recommend a certain vulnerability and openness to the criticism of others. Ultimately, Jesus himself was to endure the full force of public opposition. The shepherd laid down his life for the sheep.

The establishment of disciplines around those in authority is vital to a healthy society. In countries where bribery and corruption are perceived as inevitable, there is a huge waste of resources, minimal public trust and very little capacity for building a healthy society. It is said that you are a mug if you do not accept a bribe in Nigeria today. That is their system. It is disastrous. In the West public confidence in politicians has fallen dramatically over the last thirty years.

Many of us exercise authority over someone. I wonder if we have thought through how we should do that? These questions can be considered by anyone in authority: What public do I serve? Or, in other words, who do I have power over? Do I act with a proper impartiality toward all those for whom I have responsibility? Or do I deliberately favour friends, powerful allies or those who think like me and approve of me? Are there disciplines around my role so as to protect impartiality? These may be rules or customs that we instinctively dislike because we have failed to appreciate their purpose.

Do we deliberately allow criticism of the way we exercise that role so that we can learn? Or do we view all opposition as a hindrance?

He said it wouldn't be easy. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F De Waal, *Good natured: the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*. (Harvard University Press, 1996) pp 128-132.

<sup>2</sup> O O'Donovan, *The desire of nations*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996) offers a scholarly review of the authority of God.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 10 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 16 19.

<sup>5</sup> Job 29 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 72.

<sup>7</sup> details from I MacLaurin, *Tiger by the tail: a life in business from Tesco to cricket* (Macmillan, 1999) pp 125-148.

<sup>8</sup> S A Renshon, *High hopes: the Clinton presidency and the politics of ambition* (Routledge, 1998) p 29.