



TEACHING POWER: HELPING EDUCATORS UNDERSTAND POLITICS BY THOM BOWER

Many educators become discouraged when they encounter politics. What typically is disheartening is not politics itself, but the dynamics of power. For many religious people, power and politics are signs of systems gone awry, but power and politics are normal in human relationships. What has gone awry is our understanding and use of power and politics. By not discussing these matters, we flounder when we encounter unhealthy applications of power. To begin intentionally engaging these dynamics, many of us need a basic vocabulary.

Politics, simply stated, is about group decision-making. We focus on formalized processes, which are important, but never the totality of decision-making in any group. As informal processes come into play, it is necessary to assess power. **Power** is the ability to influence the decision-making of another. Power can be coercive or persuasive, destructive or constructive, unilateral or cooperative.

Power

Not all power is the same. **Prescribed power** comes from decision-making processes. Prescribed power will be specifically named in the by-laws of an organization and is directly connected to rights, roles, and

responsibilities. **Rights** are granted under specified conditions: here in the United States, we are guaranteed certain rights (free speech, for example), but we are not given the right to exercise it in every circumstance; for instance, most of us do not have the right to speak in Senate. **Roles** usually are defined by functionality, commonly with control over designated resources, be they material (such as finances) or immaterial (such as time, focus of attention, prayer). **Responsibilities** are duties related to carrying out one's roles. Responsibilities can be tied directly to the function of a role, such as conducting meeting, but they also can be ancillary – ensuring accurate minutes are taken, for instance.

Ascribed power influences decision-making in ways other than the formal rules. Because ascribed power lacks formality, the rights, roles, and responsibilities

– and especially the resources they control – are usually unwritten, non-ritualized, and linked to group dynamics. Since ascribed power is trickier to identify than prescribed power, we need additional vocabulary and consideration of another political factor, namely status.

Status

Status is a social distinction carrying the ability to influence decision-making. Like power, status is prescribed and ascribed. **Prescribed status** is achieved by filling certain roles, accepting certain responsibilities, and exercising certain rights. **Ascribed status** is founded in informal relationships and is often influenced by established roles. For example, you relate to your grandparents in a certain way because they, as elders, possess a prescribed status. Yet you relate to each of your maternal and paternal grandparents differently based on your relationships with them – the ascribed status.

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Status and power are similar and yet differentiated because status is derived from relationships. Status is *fluid*, constantly adapting to ongoing change. Status is also *relative*, affected by whom we are relating to and to whom we are being compared. Status is defined by the *referent community*; relationships granting high status in one group may not have the necessary influence to transfer similar status in another community. We see the dynamics of status when a celebrated leader in one neighborhood is unable to gain access in a different one, or when an influential person in one



church committee tries to influence another committee.

Cultural perceptions affect status. We've done a lot of work on how race, gender, gender preference, and economic strata influence status, but there is yet much work to do. Status is affected by other culturally-shaped perceptions such as eye and hair color, height, weight, age, clothing, and the way we carry our bodies.

Church Politics

Although we must apply power analyses to our work as educators, conducting a "power assessment" of the congregations in which we worship and work can be intimidating and, if clumsily or indiscreetly done, damaging. These are people who we love and with whom we seek to be faithful. There are more productive ways to begin to utilize the vocabulary of power and politics that will not destroy our relationships.

One way to depersonalize this analysis is to focus on the committees of your congregation. Identify their formal power and status by looking at the constitution and the budget. Pay

attention to which committees get "air time" during announcements and how much space is devoted to specific committees in newsletters. Pay attention to the committees that have volunteers and identify how they recruit. Avoid the tendency to list the "most popular" committees or to accusingly point fingers at individuals who have power; after all, these assessments describing the systems of decision-making are being made in order for Christian education to be more affective and influential in a congregation.

If such an examination of your congregation and its committees is still too personal, gather a group to watch a favorite movie: *Shrek*, *Star Wars*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, and *Casablanca* come to mind. Stop at different points in the story to identify which characters have ascribed power and status. How do these differences affect the decisions they make?

A similar exercise can be mixed with Bible study. Numerous stories relate to decision-making processes influenced by power and status. An easy entry is Esther. Read the story aloud inviting each

individual to take one character's lines. Stop and identify the prescribed power and associated responsibilities, rights, roles, and resources that are accessible to each character. Then assess their ascribed power. Finally, from a particular character's point of view, order the characters' status from highest to lowest.

Power and status are part of our relationships. If we choose to ignore them, we limit our effectiveness as leaders. Attending to these aspects of being human, we are better able to work with others in achieving visions of peaceful relationships. We must be vigilant in our applications of power and strategies that are used to influence others' decisions. We are called to reduce obstacles to open exchange, seeking to improve our shared ability in making decisions as people of God. Let us also apply our power so that the processes in which we participate are cooperative, respectful, and healthy.

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