

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Surprising Insights Into Authority and Power"  
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Our notions of authority and power determine a significant part of our worldviews, the way we see and act in the world. I remember the first time I spent time with a person at graduate school who hated police officers and all those in civil authority. It took me aback, even shocked me, because that was not my perception of authority. I remember another friend that used to watch Hawaii Five-O, do you remember that television show with Jack Lord? He used to watch the show just to make fun of the detectives.

Now making fun of television detectives on TV and actively deriding law enforcement officers in person are two quite significantly different exercises, but they both can come from a place of anti-authority and anti-establishment positions. Why does God say that the authorities have been established by God? Even stronger than that: that there is no authority except that which God has established. (Romans 13:1) This is in reference to the civil government of the day.

Today we are in a season of deciding which authorities will draft laws and chart the course of the nation (actually in both nations). But why does this make any difference, why become involved? I've already heard of election fatigue and great indifference from some of the media outlets.

Why does God give us leaders in government, in communities, in the church? Why did God give Israel leaders like Moses? Why do we have leaders at all, why not have only fully equal, undiscernibly similar groups of individuals leading rather than any particular individual? We could have government by committee alone.

But as you know, even the Presbyterian Church doesn't rule only by committee. We have checks and balances between individuals and groups. The Minister of a church, for instance, leads the session (the local board of elders) as the executive of the presbytery, but has no vote except in the case of a tie, and cannot propose motions. I am accountable not to the congregation, but to the presbytery (the regional board of elders and pastors).

Our presbytery in turn is accountable to the Synod of the Atlantic Provinces, which is in turn accountable to the national General Assembly. That Assembly is made up of a rotating group of 300 or so delegates each year, half lay and half clergy, constituting more checks and balances for the direction we take.

In the national church, we have leaders, in some institutions they would be called executives, although they are called general and associate secretaries, helping the church do its work. This Presbyterians Sharing Sunday acknowledges that we have an approximate ten million dollar budget which in part goes to churches, in large part to missions here in Canada and abroad, to the theological education and to maintaining an office and staff in Toronto at 50 Wynford Drive, to help serve the church. In the insert in your bulletin, you have an exact breakdown of how much goes where. Some question why we should have this type of sharing, although we would have no national church without some administrative body and format to bless individual congregations and missions here and around the world.

Some question why we should have leaders at all. Why was it that God established authorities and leaders? I think it was for the protection and guidance of the community. It was certainly for that purpose in the wilderness with Moses. But you remember what the people said over and over. They didn't praise God for the protection, provision and guidance of his servant Moses. What did they say to him? What the heck did you bring us out here in the desert? Why didn't you let us die in Egypt? And the Scripture gives us the insight that they weren't really complaining about their leader, but about their God.

And the well established routine was for Moses to take the complaints of the people and put them before God for God's answer. You know, if you do have someone who complains to you regularly, or even not so regularly, try this: Bring that complaint to God. Then listen to what God has to say. Usually, not always, usually there is some truth in the complaint. God often will give you a creative response, and as you open yourself to God in the process, God teaches you something new and you grow, although the process is sometimes painful.

Leaders then go ahead of the group, visioning, seeing what will happen, trailblazing, as Moses is instructed by God in Exodus 17:5. That's when the creative and even miraculous thing comes about. The leader, chosen by

God, affirmed at one time by the people, in their following that leader has the pain and the privilege of guiding God's people to quench their thirst from the Rock that gives life. Every week we seek to do this here: to guide you to the Rock which is greater than yourself, even Jesus Christ.

Jesus' authority was questioned by the religious authorities. They asked him how he could legitimize what he was doing. "By what authority do you say and do what you do?" He could have said as he did in other instances that he was simply doing what he heard his Father telling him to do. He could have said that if they don't believe what he says, they should consider the wonders and miracles he performed, well witnessed by many people.

But he didn't say those things. He chose to ask a question. That question was a simple one. What did these religious leaders think about John the Baptizer? Was he from God or not? So they weighed up the politically correct things to say with the things they wanted to say, just as many politicians in Canada and the United States are doing right now, and they come up with absolutely nothing. They were forced, by their conclusion, into telling the lie that they didn't know. They thought they knew but were too afraid to speak, because they knew the people would not let them speak ill of the prophet John.

So Jesus told them that he too would hide his authority for saying and doing what he said and did, although it certainly was not hidden, and in fact revealed on many occasions. Then he went on to tell a story saying there were two sons. One told his father he would go into the family business, but when the time came, he did not. The other son told his father he would not go into the family business, but when the time came, he actually did go into that business. Which one did the father's will? The answer is the one that actually did the father's business. And in this way Jesus says that it is not simply our talk that is weighed, it is what we have done.

One man described it this way: Our lives are like the wake off a ship or power boat. Our personal deeds flows out the one side of the ship, and our public and working life flows out the other. People see what is left behind us, in our jobs, in our homes, in our families, in our reputations. We may have opinions about ourselves, but in the end, there will be other opinions about us as our lives are weighed at our funerals, or perhaps in the media, if we have had some measure of authority or leadership, notoriety of both dark and light varieties. Beyond all this, one opinion will matter: God's opinion.

So we are encouraged to submit to the authorities placed over us, for our good and the good of the whole society. We are encouraged to receive teaching and guidance from spiritual authorities in the church.

We know that such authorities, both in the culture and in the religious community have gone awry at times. There are devastating examples of those who have abused power and those vulnerable under their care. Nevertheless, we are given leaders for our good. And both within the Presbyterian Church and all the levels of civil government, we are given a voice, a vote.

I encourage you to exercise your voice and vote. Become well versed in the issues at hand.

I also encourage you to learn more about your faith. We often talk about Jesus as Lord, but know little of what this means. In fact all the music today, has some aspect of Jesus' lordship within it. What does it mean to completely surrender to his leadership, to completely agree with his guidance and care?

Every person is called by God to seriously consider that question. It is the question of life. How will you choose to honour God with your gifts, talents and abilities? How will you discern the spiritual environment of your work, your home, your family, your friendships? Only as we draw near to God and one another in this congregation and across denominations, will we have what we need to answer these pressing questions.

Let us pray.