

# For Such a Time as This: Helping Students Understand Power and Authority by Examining National Events from Spring 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

“Say to these people: keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive” (Isaiah 6:9, Christian Standard Bible).

There are times when it seems as though Isaiah’s prophetic words describe our students. As they enter college, many of them experience true independence for the first time. The desire for independence is a natural part of development as we transition from adolescence to adulthood (Haemmerlie et al., 1994). Independence produces a newfound sense of freedom and a desire, in some cases, to throw off all restraints. Unfettered freedom is not always a good thing. Able to behave and act as they want, college students do not always make the best choices. This can lead to problems, including weight gain (Wald, 1981), alcohol use (Haemmerlie et al., 1994), loss of sleep (Hershner & Chervin, 2014), and excessive spending (Hair, 2015). The purpose of this article is not about making better choices. It is also not about making a political statement, even though some of the illustrations are inherently political. Instead, the article’s intent is to help students understand the role and importance of power and authority in life, even as they grapple with these influences. Popular opinion seems to be suggesting we should be free from all forms of power and control (Wilkens, 2020), but they are necessary in society and for properly functioning organizations. What we should advocate instead is a biblical understanding and implementation of power and authority. The article uses two prominent situations to illustrate various aspects of power. These will be familiar to students and serve as good teaching tools.

Two national events occurring during Spring 2020 provide case studies in power and authority, as well as behavioral responses to them. The first incident involves the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the United States. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on January 20, 2020, in Washington state (Holshue et al., 2020). The victim, a 35-year-old male, received extensive treatment and eventually recovered. On January 31, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar declared the virus a public health emergency (Health and Human Services, 2020). Following several preemptive measures, President Trump proclaimed a national emergency on March 13 (U.S. Office of the President, 2020). Systematic steps were then taken to control the spread of the virus, including school and work closures, discontinuance of public gatherings, and shelter-in-place orders issued by most state governors.

The second incident occurred on Memorial Day in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Police received a call from a food market alleging that a customer tried to pay with a counterfeit \$20 bill (Jany, 2020). Investigating officers subsequently confronted George Floyd, who was ordered from his vehicle. Floyd initially resisted. In the ensuing arrest, officers handcuffed and then subdued Mr. Floyd by placing a knee on his neck for more than eight minutes. Floyd eventually lost consciousness and was later declared dead at a local hospital.

## INTENDED USAGE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The materials provided in this article are intended for use in undergraduate classes where power is a main topic

of study and students have had limited experience with its use. The illustrative cases will be most effective in a flipped-style classroom where students first familiarize themselves with textbook material on power and/or the key terms provided in the handout (Appendix A). The class meeting should begin with a brief presentation of the power bases and individual responses to the use of power (Appendix B). Afterward, the cases can be introduced, followed by extensive discussion using the suggested questions (Appendix C) and various illustration points raised throughout this article.

The illustrations of power presented here draw upon sensitive issues. Your focal audience may consist of young people with limited experience in sensitive group discussion. Setting up the activity provides an excellent opportunity to model the proper use of power and authority. Point out the importance of exploring multiple perspectives, then remind students that discussion should be professional and respectful of differing viewpoints. You should know your students well enough at this point to anticipate their reactions to the material. The George Floyd illustration can be excluded if it is likely to be controversial. There is enough material in the COVID-19 illustration to adequately explore power. Some of those examples could even be omitted as well.

When presenting sensitive material in class, try to do so at the beginning of class or immediately following a break. That will give you a chance to let students know ahead of time what is on the agenda. Stress that you have carefully weighed the risks of using sensitive materials in relation to the learning value associated with them. Provide an overview of the discussion and tell students that they may opt out without penalty (by delaying arrival to class or leaving during the break). Reiterate the importance of being respectful with comments.

One additional protection might be worth consideration. Students in the first author's class complete a survey about a variety of course-related topics during the first meeting of the semester. The last survey item asks them to identify any issues they think are too sensitive to be discussed. Most individuals indicate that all topics are "fair game" if they are handled professionally. Occasionally, a student may mention a topic that is scheduled for discussion at some point in the course. We recommend speaking with them privately in advance of the discussion to see if an understanding can be reached that will allow the material to be presented. Note: this situation is perfect for modeling proper use of authority. Explain that you care about the student's sensitivity, describe the activity that is scheduled, and then ask the student if it is something that would bother them. If the student still expresses concern about the topic,

give them an opportunity to avoid participating or avoid the topic. Do not force the student to "give in" to participation.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF POWER IN SOCIETY AND ORGANIZATIONS

Leadership and power appear as two closely related concepts, and if we want to understand effective leadership, we may begin by studying the power motive in thought and action. (McClelland, 1975, p. 254)

Power is the ability to control the behavior of others (French & Raven, 1962). It might be a bit more palatable to say that power is what allows those in authority to make things happen in the way they want or need. When we use power, we are attempting to influence the behavior of others (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). Power, and the ability to use it, exists to the extent one individual is dependent on another (Molm, 1985). The essence of power is control and obedience. These words typically carry negative connotations. However, properly understood and utilized, they can lead to more effective organizations and better functioning societies. For example, if we view control as something used to regulate and/or create consistency (e.g., a heating/air conditioning thermostat), then control is a good thing. Systems of authority and obedience to these are important parts of social structure (Milgram, 1963). When authorities are reliable, obedience to carefully crafted directives will be instrumental for ensuring consistency.

Power, and its consequent control and obedience, is a vital tool for helping leaders achieve their purposes. Therefore, a closer examination of power and the ways in which it operates is important for our students. Initially, researchers identified five bases of social power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert (Raven & French, 1958). These bases have been recognized as being derived from either position or personal characteristics. More recently, other bases have been recognized, including process, information, representative, and coalition (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). All the bases are defined and categorized in Appendix A. Other terms related to power are also included in this handout. The cases that follow offer numerous examples to illustrate these bases and discuss their effectiveness.

## REAL-LIFE ILLUSTRATIONS OF VARIOUS POWER CONCEPTS

### *The COVID-19 Pandemic*

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic at world, national, and state levels is an excellent case study in the use

of power. Not all the illustrations are positive, as demonstrated by public frustration and reaction to circumstances that occurred. Of the bases of power previously identified, reward and referent are not perfectly obvious in the descriptions that follow. They can still be illustrated.

### **Legitimate Power**

As members of society and organizations, we do things in exchange for certain inducements or benefits (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). Part of the exchange is the recognition of authority. Within any structure there is a hierarchy that establishes authority relationships or the “right of command.” This right is legitimate power, given to individuals because they occupy a position in the hierarchy and are responsible for individuals in positions subordinate to them.

While acknowledging that checks and balances exist, it is fair to say our system of government gives the president ultimate authority to make decisions on behalf of all citizens. That is why citizens often look to the president for leadership in times of crisis. For example, President George W. Bush declared the first of two national emergencies on September 14, 2001, following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Executive Office of the President, 2001). Establishing a precedent for the COVID-19 pandemic, President Barack Obama declared a national emergency on October 24, 2009 in response to the H1N1 influenza pandemic (Executive Office of the President, 2009).

On March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency in response to COVID-19 (Executive Office of the President, 2020). In this declaration, the president authorized Alex Azar, secretary of Health and Human Services, to waive/modify insurance requirements in response to the outbreak (U.S. Office of the President, 2020). The proclamation specifically noted that the secretary’s power would not supersede that of the president. Vice President Mike Pence was subsequently appointed as chair of the White House Coronavirus Task Force (Cancryn et al., 2020). These individuals, by virtue of election and/or appointment, had legitimate power to act on behalf of the country in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Reward Power**

Federal and state governments mandated the shutdown of many businesses at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To mitigate these actions, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Stimulus (CARES) Act. One provision of the act was an economic impact payment to individual citizens. A letter sent to 90 million Americans from the U.S. Treasury Department and signed by President Donald Trump stated that the govern-

ment was “working . . . to protect hardworking Americans . . . from the consequences of the economic shutdown” (Rein & Singletary, 2020). If reward power is the ability to use extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to control behavior (Schermerhorn et al., 2012), then the government’s payment reflects this base of power. The act created other forms of reward power. It provided extended unemployment insurance (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.) and empowered the Small Business Administration to administer a Paycheck Protection Program (Small Business Administration, 2020).

### **Coercive Power**

Coercive power involves denying rewards or administering punishments to control behavior (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). Various government officials used their positions to enforce shutdown orders while exacting penalties on citizens and businesses that did not comply. For example, members of the Greenville, Mississippi, King James Baptist Church were fined \$500 each for attending a drive-in Easter service despite observing social distancing measures (Suriani, 2020). Texas salon owner Shelley Luther was jailed for opening her business in defiance of Governor Greg Abbott’s closure order (Platoff, 2020). Ms. Luther completed two days of a seven-day sentence before state GOP lawmakers secured an early release. After reopening for two days in defiance of New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy’s closure order, Bellmawr’s Atilis Gym was ordered to close by a state judge following a complaint issued by Attorney General Gurbir Grewal (Pries, 2020).

### **Process Power**

Process power exists when individuals or groups control production and analysis (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). During the early stages of the pandemic, President Trump called for all government resources to be concentrated on fighting coronavirus. The Department of Defense, which held strategic reserves of medical supplies, began implementing plans to distribute those resources where they were most needed (Lopez, 2020). In addition, the department deployed the USNS Comfort to New York City to help with the burden of caring for COVID-19 patients (Choi, 2020). President Trump also tapped White House economic adviser Peter Navarro to compel private businesses, under the Defense Production Act, to join the fight against coronavirus (Swan, 2020). On a smaller, yet global, scale, world-wide relief organization Samaritan’s Purse mobilized to provide supplies and medical care in New York City and Milan, Italy (Samaritan’s Purse, 2020). While these actions were not actual production methods, they did control the distribution of needed products and services to fight the virus and constituted process power.

A negative example of the use of this base of power occurred when China withheld information about the full extent of the outbreak to accumulate needed medical supplies. China increased imports of face masks, surgical gowns, and surgical gloves while decreasing exports of these items, ventilators, thermometers, and cotton balls/swabs during January 2020 (“Coronavirus,” 2020). Two other negative factors relate to the supply chain for pharmaceuticals. China manufactures about 80 percent of the basic ingredients for producing drugs in the United States (Huang, 2020). The coronavirus outbreak affected most Chinese manufacturers, which affected the supply of important drugs. Indian drug maker Zydus Cadila reported that the cost for raw materials used in making hydroxychloroquine increased 10-fold to 20-fold (Findlay & Yu, 2020).

### **Information Power**

Power can come to those who have access to and/or control how information is disseminated (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). From the outset, television and print media controlled the narrative and held information power. The media influenced public opinion about the seriousness of COVID-19 and what steps should be taken to deal with the pandemic. Government officials responded to the public pressure to “do something” with extraordinary and unprecedented measures (Eggers et al., 2020). They did so out of an abundance of caution, but also to avoid public scrutiny in the media.

While the total number of cases has been significantly higher for SARS-CoV-2 (more commonly COVID-19) than for SARS-CoV (occurring in 2003) and MERS-CoV (occurring in 2012), the case fatality rate of 1.38% to 3.4% is much lower than the SARS rate of 9.6% and MERS rate of 34.3% (Hewings-Martin, 2020). Why all the panic? Why did we shut down the biggest part of the country for weeks? A lot of it had to do with framing or alternative wordings of the same objective information (Bazerman & Moore, 2013, p. 84). Fear played a role in coverage of the outbreak (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). The media framed the outbreak with sensationalist claims and scaremongering headlines (O’Brien, 2020; see also Smith, 2019, for a similar take on the media’s tactics). They wanted to attract viewers and readers. In doing so, they created a negative (i.e., people focused on deaths) rather than a positive (i.e., people focused on survival rates) frame of reference. When individuals have a negative (versus a positive) frame, they take extreme actions and/or are willing to accept extreme measures (Bazerman & Moore, 2013, p. 84).

### **Representative Power**

Representative power is a formal right that enables an individual or small group of individuals to speak on

behalf of others (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). The White House Coronavirus Task Force was established on January 29, 2020, and President Trump formally appointed Vice President Mike Pence as its chair on February 26 (Cancryn et al., 2020). Dr. Deborah Birx, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, was named White House Coronavirus Task Force Coordinator. While Vice President Pence and numerous other officials attended press briefings, three individuals quickly became the “faces” of the effort to combat coronavirus in the United States. Along with Dr. Birx, the main spokespeople were Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Dr. Jerome Adams, U.S. Surgeon General. Shortly thereafter, individual states began conducting daily briefings with governors and chief medical officials as representatives updating citizens on plans to combat the virus and later to reopen their economies.

### **Expert Power**

The ability to control behavior through knowledge, experience, or judgment is expert power (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). The country initially seemed to rely on Dr. Fauci’s recommendations as the most prominent medical expert, with *The New Yorker* labeling him America’s doctor (Specter, 2020). Dr. Fauci’s experience is notable. Leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, he ran NIAID for 36 years and observed viral epidemics of HIV, SARS, swine flu, Zika, and Ebola (Specter, 2020). He directly advised presidents from Ronald Reagan through the Trump administration.

At the same time, expert power is limited to the area of expertise or knowledge a person possesses. During a U.S. Senate hearing about reopening the economy, Dr. Fauci warned about the risks of doing so too soon. Senator Rand Paul stated, “I don’t think you’re the end-all. I don’t think you’re the one person that gets to make a decision,” pointing out the limits to Fauci’s power (Murphy, 2020). The doctor confirmed those limits when he responded, “I don’t give advice about anything other than public health” (Murphy, 2020).

Because COVID-19 is novel, or new, there were a lot of unknown factors and experts occasionally disagreed. As coronavirus cases began to climb in late March and early April, some doctors questioned the efficacy of ventilators for treating the condition (Ravani & Allday, 2020). The credibility of the Centers for Disease Control has been questioned due to updated research and modeling about the disease and its spread (Biggs & Buck, 2020). Minnesota doctor Scott Jensen pointed out that CDC guidelines for classifying coronavirus deaths were such a mess that early numbers could not be accurate (Halon, 2020). When experts contradict one another, people begin to question

their expertise and they lose power. For example, when Dr. Fauci referred to evidence of hydroxychloroquine to fight coronavirus as anecdotal, White House economic adviser Peter Navarro became combative, indicating the studies he had were “science, not anecdote” (Swan, 2020). Fauci continued to stand by his assertion in a later interview. When Navarro was questioned in a separate interview, he responded, “I have a Ph.D. I understand how to read statistical studies” (Forgey, 2020). Finally, Ohio Health Director Dr. Amy Acton resigned her position as citizens questioned her authority and mounted numerous public protests aimed at the overreach of her recommendations (“Embattled State Health Director,” 2020).

### **Referent Power**

Behavior can be affected when people identify with a power source (Schermerhorn et al., 2012). Referent power may result from charisma or a clear sense of vision to which others can relate. Bill Clinton rose from relative obscurity as Arkansas governor to become president of the United States largely on the strength of his charismatic personality (Sarkis, 2011). Nearly two decades after leaving office, the former president still commands audiences because of his charm.

Throughout his presidency, Donald Trump has wielded tremendous referent power, as evidenced by huge campaign-style rallies around the country. But referent power is a double-edged sword. On one hand, for those individuals over whom he has referent power, he can say or do no wrong (Quatro, 2020). If the media challenges President Trump, supporters dismiss the media as biased. If critics attack the president, his supporters believe they are being attacked and respond with resentment (Quatro, 2020). On the other hand, for those individuals that oppose the president, and over whom he holds no referent power, he can do no right (Smith, 2019). The result is a sharp dichotomy in trust, favorability ratings, and general support (Quatro, 2020).

For some, President Trump has been characterized as a “post-truth leader” for his ability to make claims that are somewhat or not at all based in fact (Spoelstra, 2019). When the president stated that he was taking hydroxychloroquine as protection against coronavirus, some people believed the drug was the cure (Joseph, 2020). Others did not. When President Trump said that he wanted to see the country reopened by Easter and churches packed, people were excited (Miller & Superville, 2020). When that did not come to fruition, the public naturally assumed it was the fault of state governors and the protests began (see below).

### **Coalition Power**

In a variety of life situations, individuals do not hold much power. We do not get to tell utility companies how much we want to pay for water, electricity, or cable.

However, if we join up with neighbors to form an energy cooperative, we may be able to negotiate a better rate for electricity simply because of our collective buying power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans felt powerless. People began to question the credibility of the media (Biggs & Buck, 2020). By mid-April, as shutdown orders continued, citizens began organizing on social media. Coalition power is the ability to control behavior indirectly because individuals/groups are part of a larger collective interest (Schermerhorn, 2012). The first public protest occurred on April 15 as thousands of demonstrators gathered at the Michigan statehouse (Hernandez, 2020). The action was supported by President Trump (Gearan & Wagner, 2020; Hernandez, 2020). Citizens in Indiana and Tennessee quickly followed suit. In California, a group of 1,200 pastors frustrated that grocery stores and other big businesses were open, petitioned Governor Gavin Newsome to allow churches to meet (Porterfield, 2020). They also indicated their intention to begin holding services on May 31.

Coalition power can have mixed results depending on how strong opposition power is. Rally organizer Ryan Kelley stated that the Michigan protest was successful because lawmakers refused to extend Governor Gretchen Witmer’s emergency declaration (Associated Press, 2020). Protests in other states likely influenced some governors’ decisions to begin reopening their economies. In California, however, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Governor Newsome’s ban on in-person church services.

### ***The George Floyd Arrest***

As with any law enforcement encounter, two bases of power are immediately evident. Police officers control behavior by utilizing *legitimate* and *coercive* power. They have formal authority granted to them to enforce various laws regarding public safety. While most citizens recognize this authority and follow directives out of a sense of moral obligation, others will follow them to avoid penalties. In the latter, coercive or fear-based power is operational. The law also empowers officers to use their judgment to decide the best means for gaining compliance. Herein lies the problem in the case of George Floyd. Noting that the whole story is not clear as of this writing, it appears that officers tried to get Floyd to comply with their directive(s) and determined that he would not. If Mr. Floyd did not completely follow orders, it could be assumed that those directives were outside his *zone of indifference*. The officers then determined that force was needed to gain compliance and the force used became excessive. Their actions, captured on social media, clearly represent an abuse of power. They exceeded their mandate.

Court appearances by the officers involved in the incident reveal another side to the power equation. Derek Chauvin's actions led directly to the death of George Floyd while Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao were also present during the arrest. Lane was a new officer and Memorial Day was his fourth shift as a full-time officer (Xiong, 2020). Actions, or lack thereof, by the assisting officers are indicative of research on obedience (see Milgram, 1963). During the bail hearing for the three assisting officers, who were charged with aiding and abetting, attorneys made arguments to support an obedience claim. Specifically, Lane's attorney asked the judge, "What is my client supposed to do but follow what the [senior] officer says?" (Xiong, 2020). In Milgram's seminal study, the researcher found that nearly two-thirds of the participants in the study fully obeyed directives from an authority figure even though they represented serious physical harm to another individual (Milgram, 1963). It appears likely that the same thing occurred on that fateful day in Minneapolis.

Public outrage over George Floyd's death developed into numerous protest marches across the country and many of these deteriorated into serious rioting. In a 1966 interview with Mike Wallace, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "A riot is the language of the unheard" (Wallace, 1966). Dr. King's statement, backed by the wave of protests/riots in response to Floyd's death, is consistent with *coalition* power. When people believe they are individually powerless, they band together with others that hold similar beliefs. Collectively, they gain a measure of power because of their critical mass. Much like responses to the handling of the coronavirus situation, these actions show a lack of group support for authorities, thus undermining their *legitimate* power. The loss of support and power is evident in the unanimous vote by the Minneapolis City Council to dismantle the city's police force (Beer, 2020).

In the days immediately following the incident, various individuals and entities issued statements condemning the actions taken by the Minneapolis police officers and supporting racial equality. Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement expressing grief over the death of George Floyd and the organization's commitment to "the dignity of all people" (Baptist Press Staff, 2020). As the leader of one of the most prominent corporations based in Minneapolis, Best Buy CEO Corie Barry issued a note expressing concern about and steps to address racial injustice and, simultaneously, the pandemic (Best Buy, 2020). Statements like these, coming from authority figures, are indicative of *legitimate* and *representative* power. They also reflect a form of *coalition* power because they express that the entities side with those who feel most affected by the

tragedy. Finally, there is *process* power shown to the extent that these entities outline steps being taken to address the issue. For example, Best Buy is creating a special group to examine how the company acts and a commitment to open 100 Teen Tech Centers to create opportunities for young people in disinvested communities (Best Buy, 2020).

### ***Some Lessons Learned (About Power) from Both Situations***

In a famous story by Aesop, a little boy cried, "Wolf! Wolf! The wolf is chasing the sheep!" for amusement. The villagers told him not to sound an alarm unnecessarily because nobody would believe him if something really happened. In a similar tale, Chicken Little is hit on the head by a falling acorn and mistakenly assumes the sky is falling. After convincing other animals of an impending disaster, Chicken Little narrowly avoids the true danger (i.e., getting eaten by Foxy Loxy) that befalls these friends. The collective moral of these stories is to tell the truth and make sure the message is supported by facts. Throughout the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic there were differing opinions on the projected death toll, how the virus was transmitted, and the efficacy of wearing protective masks. In the case of George Floyd, his death was initially determined to be a heart attack, with heart disease and drug use as contributing factors (Baker, 2020; Koerth, 2020). Later, forensic pathologist Dr. Michael Baden examined the body and concluded that death was due to "asphyxiation from sustained pressure" (Reyes et al., 2020). When credibility is called into question, power is reduced because individuals no longer trust those in power. This is particularly true for legitimate, information, representative, and expert bases of power.

Despite all we learn growing up about blindly following others (e.g., if everyone else jumped off a bridge, would you?), obedience seems to be deeply rooted in our understanding of how to navigate authority situations. Milgram (1963) indicated that the phenomenon of obedience rests in the context. A sense of commitment to a boss, job, or organization is likely to produce an obligation to follow orders (Milgram, 1963). In situations where the individuals involved perceive a risk, there may be less questioning of directives and greater obedience to authorities. Such appears to be the case with how the public at large responded to shelter-in-place orders during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic and the actions of the officers that assisted in the arrest of George Floyd. When we receive directives from others, it is acceptable to ask a few questions before following through. Is this individual in a position of authority over me? Does the directive fall within the boundaries of the authority relationship (i.e., does the authority figure have the right to direct me in this manner)? Does the directive violate legal, ethical, or organizational standards?

When authority figures abuse legitimate power, individuals may defy directives. Some individuals consider wearing masks in public government overreach and refuse to do so on the grounds it violates personal liberty (Rozsa et al., 2020). Defiance can sometimes be an effective tool for getting individuals in power to change their approach. Such was the case as governors extended stay-at-home orders and made seemingly arbitrary decisions about which businesses could be open and which could not (Behrmann, 2020). Furthermore, when the legitimacy of authority figures is questioned and coercive power is used (i.e., authorities are oppressive), reactions may become hostile. Minority communities have been questioning the legitimacy of law enforcement officials going all the way back to the Rodney King beating (Whitman, 1993), the Elian Gonzalez affair (Thomas et al., 2000), and the shooting of Michael Brown (“Gunshots,” 2014). The death of George Floyd was another tipping point that sparked national outrage and hostility. Ironically, Raven and French (1958) predicted something very similar half a century ago.

Finally, actions speak louder than words when it comes to power. Minorities have been hearing about injustice for decades from individuals representing all points on the political spectrum. It would be easy to think that the nation’s first minority president would have been able to improve the status of minorities, but the reality is their economic situation declined under President Obama (Moore, 2017). On the other hand, as black economic progress improved under President Trump, his approval ratings climbed within that demographic (Graham, 2019). Representative power, in and of itself, is not necessarily enough to produce systemic change without process power. An unfortunate consequence of the two-party political system is that many of our governmental leaders are virtually powerless to effect change because the process works against them. In addition, many in power recognize that solving problems reduces dependency, which is key to holding power over others. These are some of the reasons many Americans do not trust politicians. A Pew Research Center study indicated poor government performance is the biggest reason for the declining public trust in politicians (Rainie & Perrin, 2019).

#### **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POWER AND AUTHORITY**

The Bible has much to say about power and authority, but many of these references have strictly spiritual implications. What we learn about worldly authority can be inferred from Scripture and various stories/illustrations. One thing is

clear: authority is a part of living in this world. Genesis 2:15 states that humans were placed in the garden of Eden “to work it and watch over it.” God then delegated responsibility to Adam for naming all the other creatures and gave him “rule” over them. Following original sin, God pronounced judgment on his creation, part of which included the subjection of creatures within a hierarchical relationship. This pronouncement is known as the dominion mandate.

Authority is more clearly identified in Genesis 9:2. After the Great Flood, God told Noah that all of creation was “placed under [his] authority.” Other translations use “deliver” or “given.” The Hebrew word used here is *nita-nu* or *nathan* (נָתַן), which means to give, put, or set. Strong’s (1890) reference 5414 offers several interpretations of the word that are consistent with authority, including assigned, committed, entrusted, and submitted. Arguably, there are four areas where God has delegated authority to us: home/family structure (Genesis 2-3; Ephesians 5-6; see also Jesus’s example in Luke 2:51), government (Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-14), church (Hebrews 13:17; Titus 1:5; I Peter 5:1-5), and work (I Peter 2:13, 18). Proper understanding of power and authority within these institutions should begin with a right perspective on how we operate in all areas of our lives. In I Corinthians 10:31, we are told “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” Thus, any teaching about the use of power and authority starts with the realization that Christians must act differently than non-Christians in all realms of life. We are called to follow a higher standard (see, for example, Romans 12:2; II Corinthians 5:10, 16).

Our standard begins with Christ. Jesus told his disciples that he had all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). The Greek word for authority is *exousia* (ἐξουσία), which means rule, dominion, or jurisdiction and elsewhere means power or ability (e.g., Matthew 7:29). This authority was recognized by others during Jesus’s earthly ministry (see Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22-27; Luke 4:32-36). The most notable case is reported in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. In this story, a distraught centurion approaches Jesus and asks him to heal a servant. When Jesus offered to go to the home, the soldier said he was not worthy. He added that he understood authority, knew Jesus had it, and simply asked him to “say the word.” It was one of the few cases where the Bible reports that Jesus was astounded by the faith of another individual. In Ephesians 1:20-21, we are told that Christ has authority above all rulers, powers, dominions, and titles. As such, any power or authority we possess is subject to him. Likewise, when we come under the authority or power of another individual, we must remember that God allows it to be so (Romans 13:1-3) and we are subject to them as well.

### *Exercising Power and Authority Over Others*

In Ephesians 5 and 6, Paul provides several admonitions for how to walk as Christians in our relationships with others. Each of the relationships discussed is hierarchical (i.e., husband and wife, parents and children, master and slave) and reflects authority. In Ephesians 5:28, husbands are told to love their wives. Love is the Greek *agapaō* (ἀγαπάω) which means to love, value, esteem, or feel/show generous concern. In other words, individuals in authority should care for and have respect for those over whom they have charge because they are valuable and esteemed. We should not treat people under our authority harshly or as lesser individuals. In Ephesians 6:4, fathers are told not to “stir up anger in [their] children.” Other translations read “do not exasperate.” While the teaching confirms that we should not act harshly toward those over whom we have authority, it carries the principle a little further. The remainder of the verse reads “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord,” which suggests we are to make sure the people we lead are properly educated and trained. We should not ask for nor expect those in our charge to do anything they are not capable of doing. Assigning tasks without proper instruction or training will only frustrate them and make them resent our authority. Likewise, work should be meaningful before it is assigned.

The movie *Cool Hand Luke* offers an excellent cinematic illustration in the misuse of power and authority that relates to Paul’s teaching (Carroll & Rosenberg, 1967). Lucas Jackson is incarcerated for the relatively petty crime of cutting the tops off parking meters. Throughout the early part of the movie, there are many examples of authority in the form of rules. Occasionally, legitimate power is exercised by having prisoners complete menial tasks. Coercive power is levied any time an inmate gets out of line. We can fully understand what it means to exasperate someone when Luke returns to the prison camp after his second escape attempt. As Dragline says, “Well, you made it through the first week,” the yard boss pulls Luke aside and orders him to get his dirt out of the captain’s ditch. He digs through the night until morning when the day the boss asks why dirt is in his yard. Luke then begins to shovel it all back in the hole. The cycle repeats itself again until Luke finally succumbs and acknowledges his “mind is right.” They have broken Luke. We should not do the same to those over whom we have authority.

The Apostle Paul had authority, both as an officer for the chief priests (Acts 9:14, 26:10) and throughout his ministry (II Corinthians 10:8), but he did not lord it over others because it had been given to him from God. We should not be oppressive, harsh, or threatening (Leviticus 25:43; Malachi 3:5; Ephesians 6:9). Likewise, Peter instructed

elders not to “act as if you were a ruler over those under your care” (I Peter 5:3). Instead, they were to be examples. In what way? The preceding verse is instructive: “Shepherd God’s flock” (i.e., the believers under your care). Watch over them not out of compulsion but because you want to do so. That is what God expects from us as leaders. Be a servant (I Peter 5:2). We are told to deal with others justly and fairly because that is how our Master in heaven deals with us (Colossians 4:1; also Proverbs 3:27). That includes offering a reasonable and timely payment for the work people do (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; James 5:4). Finally, we should offer opportunities for reconciliation when we have been wronged by those who serve us (Philemon 1:8-21).

### *Responding to Authority Figures*

The Apostle Paul lived under oppressive Roman rule. He experienced severe punishments, including being jailed more than once and the threat of death (which ultimately came to pass). Still, he wrote quite extensively about submitting to authority. In Romans 8, he tells us that Christians should walk “according to the Spirit” (verse 4) and “live according to the Spirit” (verse 5). As such, we obey God’s laws, which includes submitting to authority. The requirement to submit is not conditioned on whether we like or agree with those in authority (Romans 13:1). Paul goes on to say that non-Christians (i.e., those who walk in the flesh) are “hostile to God” and do not “submit to God’s law” (verse 7). Therefore, we can expect to see that there will be some that rebel against authority and do not obey God’s or man’s laws, but that does not give us cause to do the same.

The writer of Hebrews is even more direct about how we should respond to those in authority. Hebrews 13:17 states, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” The word rendered leader is the Greek *hēgeomai* (ἡγέομαι) which elsewhere means ruler (see Matthew 2:6 and Acts 7:10). Once again, obeying and submitting is not qualified in any way. It does not say to do so if you voted for the leader or if you like what they tell you to do. Furthermore, there is a reason given for the admonition—so that they can “watch over” us “with joy and not with grief.” It is “unprofitable” (i.e., of no advantage) for us to cause grief for those in authority.

These sentiments are also echoed by the Apostles Peter and Paul. In I Peter 2:13-14, we are told to “submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority or to governors as



those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good.” Paul tells Titus to remind those in his charge that they should “submit to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to slander no one, to avoid fighting, and to be kind, always showing gentleness to all people” (Titus 3:1-2). The implication of these passages is quite clear. We have a duty as Christians to follow directives from authority figures and to do so without causing problems. Failing that, we should expect that there will be consequences (Romans 13:2-3). For example, if we exceed the speed limit and get caught, we can expect to pay a fine. If we do not pay our taxes and get audited, we can expect to pay them with penalty. If we do not do as our employers direct, we can expect to receive lower performance ratings, have our pay docked, receive time off without pay, miss out on promotions, or lose our jobs. In contrast, when we submit to authority with a proper attitude (e.g., humility, peace), there is no reason to be concerned (Romans 13:3).

When we submit to authorities, even the ones that are unkind, and obey them, we are showing respect for God (I Peter 2:18). Titus 2:9 states that we “must not talk back to” our masters. This does not mean that we are unable to state preferences or share ideas/opinions when they are solicited. On the contrary, it means that we should not argue with those in charge. As an employee, do you want to “shine like stars in the sky?” When we are given tasks that we do not want to complete or do not enjoy, we do them without complaint or argument because it leaves us blameless (Philippians 2:14-15). Titus 3:1 says that God’s people should “be ready to do what is good.” That might mean volunteering for an assignment that nobody else wants to take. Imagine the reaction that might get from the boss.

And what about work effort? Is it good enough just to be good enough? Colossians 3:23 tells us that we should serve those in authority *with all our hearts*, as serving the Lord and not as serving people. We should have a good attitude about it as well (Ephesians 6:7). Ecclesiastes 3:22 states, “A person should enjoy their work; that is what God made them for.” We are to work hard all the time not just when we are being observed (Colossians 3:22). On the occasion when we work for a Christian boss, we are told to “serve them even better” (I Timothy 6:2). Finally, if we fail to do any of these things, we give others the opportunity to “speak evil things against God’s name” (I Timothy 6:1).

### SUMMARY

Power and authority are necessary for the smooth functioning of society and organizations. Without them,

chaos and anarchy will result. Unfortunately, the mishandling of situations during the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd’s arrest left many people questioning the use of power and resisting authority. This is not surprising, as we can expect to see a corruption of good in a fallen world (Romans 8:22).

As Christian instructors, it is our duty to help students understand the necessity of power and authority. We must teach them how to properly use these tools. It is incumbent on Christian leaders to model proper behavior by exercising power and authority in a manner consistent with Scripture. As Christian citizens, we know that Christ redeemed us from lawlessness (Titus 2:14). We should live our lives, including how we respond to authority, like we have been redeemed and in a manner that honors God in all we do.

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**APPENDIX A: KEY TERMS HANDOUT***(adapted from Schermerhorn, Osborn, Uhl-Bien, & Hunt, 2012)***SOURCES OF POWER**

Position Bases—power results from a position the individual holds in an organization; if the position is lost/forfeited, the individual loses/forfeits the power

- Legitimate—derived from an individual’s authority because of their position in the hierarchy
- Reward—derived from an individual’s ability to allocate rewards
- Coercive—derived from an individual’s ability to administer punishment and/or deny rewards
- Process—derived from an individual’s ability to control how things are done
- Information—derived from an individual’s access to information and to determine how it is disseminated
- Representative—derived from an individual’s formal right to speak on behalf of others

Personal Bases—power results from personal attributes or characteristics; it is independent of position and goes with the individual without respect to status or position

- Expert—derived from an individual’s possession of knowledge, experience, and skills
- Referent—derived from an individual’s characteristics that make them likeable and/or cause others to want to identify with them
- Coalition—derived from an individual’s membership in or alignment with an influential group

**OTHER CONCEPTS**

Power—the ability to control the behavior of others

Control—a means of limiting or regulating something or someone

Influence—the behavioral response to the exercise of power; individuals in power use it to create influence

Dependence—power exists to the extent an authority has control over resources others need

- Importance – how much the resource matters to individuals the authority wants to control; high importance increases power
- Scarcity—the general availability of the resource; a scarce resource increases power
- Substitutability – the availability of suitable alternatives to the resource; few available substitutes increases power

Obedience—the willingness of an individual to follow a directive from an authority

Zone of Indifference—the range of requests from an authority that an individual will obey without subjecting them to evaluation

## APPENDIX B: BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO ORIGINAL POWER BASES

Source of Influence	Outcome		
	Commitment	Compliance	Resistance
Expert	<p>LIKELY</p> <p>If request is persuasive and subordinates share leader's task goals</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If request is persuasive, but subordinates are apathetic about task goals</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If leader is arrogant and insulting, or subordinates oppose task goals</p>
Referent	<p>LIKELY</p> <p>If request is believed to be important to leader</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If request is perceived to be unimportant to leader</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If request is for something that will bring harm to leader</p>
Legitimate	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If request is polite and very appropriate</p>	<p>LIKELY</p> <p>If request or order is seen as legitimate</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If arrogant demands are made or request does not appear proper</p>
Reward	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If used in a subtle, very personal way</p>	<p>LIKELY</p> <p>If used in a mechanical or impersonal way</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If used in a manipulative, arrogant way</p>
Coercive	<p>VERY UNLIKELY</p>	<p>POSSIBLE</p> <p>If used in a helpful, non-punitive way</p>	<p>LIKELY</p> <p>If used in a hostile or, manipulative way</p>

### APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TEACHING NOTES

In thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic, what are some examples of the effective use of power? What did power allow leaders to accomplish? What were some misuses of power during the pandemic? How did people respond to these behaviors?

- Examples are provided within the paper; encourage students, particularly those that reside in a different state, to offer examples from their local area (e.g., state government, medical professionals).
- Keep in mind that the essence of power is control and obedience. We sometimes rebel against these ideas. However, when there is a crisis, the two are critical components for restoring order in chaos, easing fears, and restoring confidence. Very few people enjoyed the shutdowns and shelter-in orders, but these directives were effective in controlling behavior and flattening the infection curve.
- One of the most blatant abuses of power was the “one size fits all mentality,” insisting that all states and cities be treated the same with respect to shutdowns and re-openings. There were several states and regions where the incidence of COVID-19 was extremely low and yet they were treated the same as the New York region for weeks.

As Christians, what should our attitude and response be to directives from authority figures? Does it matter (change) if these authorities are wrong? What if directives contradict or violate Scripture?

- Romans 13:1-3 tells us that God allows individuals to be in positions of authority. In response to a good or bad leader, we are told to submit because authority is an institution established by God. Exercising good conduct keeps us from experiencing the wrath of a leader and gains their approval.
- However, we must obey God in all situations; when the orders of an earthly authority clearly violate God’s commands, we have an obligation to disregard them even when there may be severe penalties (Acts 5:29); note that Peter, whose statement Luke recorded, still encourages us to submit to governing authorities (I Peter 2:13).

As Christians and leaders, what responsibilities and obligations do we have when exercising power and authority over others?

- The familial relationships discussed in Ephesians 5 and 6 provide a good basis for how we should treat those who are under our authority. We should care for them and show respect because they are valuable and esteemed. We should not treat people under our authority harshly or as lesser individuals. We should not ask for or expect those in our charge to do anything they are not capable of doing. Work should be meaningful before it is assigned.
- Leaders and others in authority should be godly examples for the people under their care. We are to lead with the heart of a servant (I Peter 5:2). We are to be fair and exercise justice (Colossians 4:1). When we employ people, we must offer reasonable compensation that meets their needs (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; James 5:4). We must be willing to forgive others when mistakes are made (Philemon 1:8-21).

The George Floyd incident clearly represents an abuse of power. What does this case teach us? What are the consequences when authority figures abuse their power?

- As Lord Acton famously stated, “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Unfortunately, some individuals assume power and it goes to their heads. Power has a way of becoming intoxicating unless those in authority allow for “checks and balances.”

- In the Floyd case, abuses by a very small minority cause individuals to question the legitimacy of those in power—and on a national scale because the incident was raised to that level by social media. The overwhelming majority of police officers and police departments do not abuse their power, yet their reputations suffer just the same.
- When authority structures break down due to abuses, anarchy may ensue. This was the case in many major cities where rioting and looting took place. Likewise, trust in these authority structures can take years, if ever, to repair.

What should we do when authority figures issue directives that are unfair, abusive, or oppressive? Is there a lesson in submitting to authority under these circumstances?

- Jesus submitted to civil authorities, paying taxes and allowing himself to be tried even though he did no wrong (Luke 20:20). We are told in all things to “be like Christ.”
- Note the emphasized portions of the following passage: “Household slaves, submit to your masters with all reverence not only to the good and gentle ones but also to the cruel. For it brings favor if, because of a consciousness of God, someone endures grief from suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if when you do wrong and are beaten, you endure it? But when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, *this brings favor with God*. For you were called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should *follow in his steps*” (I Peter 2:18-21).
- Submitting to authority under less than desirable circumstances obeys God (Romans 13:1-2), honors God (I Peter 2:13), silences critics (I Peter 2:15).

What is the proper course of action when we do not believe, trust, or agree with authority figures?

- Scripture makes clear, we still must submit. Authority and hierarchy were ordained by God from the beginning of time. Furthermore, no authority exists that God does not allow.
- The Bible gives only one example that supports disobeying authority figures: when directives clearly contradict the Word of God. When Peter and John were commanded by the Sanhedrin to stop speaking and teaching in Jesus’s name, Peter responded, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20), and in another case when the high priest reminded the disciples of the order, Peter emphatically proclaimed, “We must obey God instead of people” (Acts 5:29).