

## Reflecting on the Powers that Be

Purpose: to analyse spiritual power dynamics in organisations (part 1) and apply the same model to ourselves (part 2), drawn from American Quaker theologian Walter Wink

Time: 45 minutes each

Preparation: Either read *The Powers That Be* or familiarise yourself with the concepts in the introduction below. If you do this as small group work you will need space and flipsheets for each group.

You might want to consider how the group you are working with may feel about Wink's terminology, 'good, fallen, redeemed' and explore with them other words they find easier to work with. One suggestion has been 'connected, disconnected, re-connected' 'good/healthy, damaged/broken, repaired/restored'.

Walter Wink in his book *The Powers That Be* talks about “the Powers” meaning organisations and institutions that wield influence. He locates spiritual ideas of evil and demons in what happens in systems and culture. As with individuals it is wiser and more helpful to avoid the notion that a particular institution is simply Good or Evil but to consider that for any one of these “Powers” they are at the same time Good, Fallen and can be Redeemed. Wink's maxim then for use in this exercise is

The Powers are good  
The Powers are fallen  
The Powers can be redeemed

“We cannot affirm that governments or universities or businesses etc are good unless we also recognise at the same time they are fallen. We cannot face their oppressiveness unless we also remember they are part of God's good creation. But also to give hope for change we assert that these powers can and must be redeemed. If we were simply to focus on the redeeming we could simply get caught in disillusionment if we don't also recognise the limits of ‘the fall’” [Walter Wink *The Powers that Be*]

To see an institution only as good we are blind to injustice and risk keeping an unjust status quo  
To see an institution only as fallen we can sink into despair or rage that sees no light for change  
To see only the redeemability could risk us just tinkering around the edges

For those who are seeking to change the system or its effects, awareness of all three elements helps to tease out effective steps towards change.

Description:

1) Think of the system, organisation or institution that you consider needs to change - “the Powers that be” that relate to your campaigning concern.

2) Identify in what way you think or feel this institution is Good, Fallen and Redeemable.

Good, you might consider

Perhaps its original purpose or parts of its vision/mission that aim to help people, provide service, increase knowledge, organise for the benefit of people or whatever you see as “good”. Maybe particular people with skills, interests, ideals etc

Fallen, you might consider

How do the people or processes of the institution use their power to control inappropriately to gain power or advantage – directly or maybe just as a spin-off from well meant policies?

Redeemed, you might consider

Where are the growing points? – People, places, ideals, signs of change?

Participants can list on a flip chart their answers

Good	Fallen	Redeemable

3) To add to the reflection see what parallels there are in your own life. The same power dynamic may be going on inside us. In what ways are you like the system you put the spotlight on?

What ways do you act a bit like a bureaucracy for example? Either in relationship to others (how are you when you have authority or have to organise something) or by seeing different aspects of your inner self such as the part that tries to get yourself organised to do things.

Good	Fallen	Redeemable

4) Go back and forth between the personal table and that about “the Powers”.  
 What clues are there in Good or Fallen aspects that show ways to Redeem?  
 What insights are there from your own experience that give you a fresh perspective on growing points for “the Powers” and where to concentrate your campaign  
 What insights from your chosen campaigning area give perspective to your inner struggles?  
 Does the exercise highlight aspects of our common humanity?

Example from a Turning the Tide Resource Person's gathering

When we did this at a Turning the Tide Resource Person’s gathering, one person worked through this exercise using what they noticed about local government bureaucracy that affected their work and campaigning.

- Good: Trying to organise thing to benefit the local population  
 Trying to help disadvantaged groups
- Fallen: Misuse of power – empire building  
 Restrictive practices  
 Poor Communications
- Redeemable: People trying to put human face on organisation  
 People trying to simplify systems and make more user-friendly  
 People speaking up against injustice in and out of system

How might I myself be similar?

- Good: Well intentioned trying to organise my life well and to help others
- Fallen: I seek to control others by how I use information  
 I often only see solution as “if only they did xy or z”  
 I do not always clearly state my needs and listen to others
- Redeemable: I can take steps to connect with people at a human level  
 I can address simplicity in my own life  
 I can speak up when I feel an injustice.

Felt less alienated from the organisation and began to see ways to act for change starting with making contacts with key individuals.