

Flawed leaders

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

Jesse Jackson is a complicated man. He has been right on most issues most of the time, though certainly not all the time. No one is more eloquent on the topic of human rights, and no one more personally committed to the cause of justice for minority and marginalized people. Jackson also has a legendary instinct for publicity: he understands the role the media play in the political arena and he knows well how to use the media. I also know that he goes to places where the media are not present, and is an advocate for people whose cause is not popular and not likely to be so. He is opportunistic, and he can seem almost vainly preening at times. But he is often warm, friendly and open.

My son, a reporter with the Associated Press, was once assigned to cover a Chicago woman's eviction from her home, an event at which Jackson was planning to make a statement. My son had tried to interview Jackson but had been unable to schedule an appointment. After Jackson made his statement, Andy confronted him about his failed effort to interview him. Jackson asked him if he had plans for dinner and on the spot invited Andy to join him for the meal. Andy got his interview and a lot more.

When three U.S. servicemen were being held in Yugoslavia, Jesse Jackson had the audacity to go there and negotiate their release. When someone from the African-American community needed to step up and voice uncomfortable truths about the number of black men fathering and abandoning babies, Jackson did it. He has talked openly about the importance of working hard in school, and he has stressed the importance of economic initiatives in the black community.

He is a poetic orator and a great preacher. I was privileged to share leadership with Jackson of a memorial service for a prominent African-American in Chicago. Jackson's eulogy was the best I ever heard. It was theologically sound, biblically literate and delivered with a spontaneous passion that transformed the occasion into a celebration of God's gift of life and God's gift of love in Jesus Christ.

The world recently learned how very flawed a human Jesse Jackson is. Some editorial writers could barely contain their glee at the news that he had fathered a child in an

extramarital affair. Many were quick to announce that he had lost his credibility. I think that is unlikely. At least in the African-American community, in which people tend to be more honest about the realities of human failure than in other parts of society, Jackson will remain a powerful figure.

People of the book know about this sort of thing—know that God uses flawed, fallen, fallible human beings to do God's work. We know about King David's affair with Bathsheba. No word of excuse should be said regarding Jackson's actions, but other words can still be said which are neither gleeful nor dismissive. They are words that Jackson has eloquently proclaimed, gospel words of sin, confession, forgiveness, restoration and new life.