

God and Power

POWER BELONGS TO GOD¹

We have looked at the power differential that is present in relationships between human persons. Given that this is so, what is the power differential between God and creatures? How does God conduct Himself in that? Does God ‘moderate’ His behaviour accordingly, to make allowance for that? If so, how does He go about it? Are these appropriate questions to ask, or does God operate according to a different framework altogether?

¹ There are a number of NCPI publications that deal with this issue.

Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Weakness of Man and the Power of God* (Christian Teaching Series No. 1, 1974) is a small and thorough coverage. It teaches about the powerlessness of human beings of themselves, and the incredible abundance of strength and power we have from God in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Deane Meatheringham’s short study, *The Weakness of God and the Power of Man* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1981), shows how God, in what appears to the world to be His ‘weakness’, has overcome the prideful ‘power’ of sinful human beings, and how it is in our weakness that God’s living power is revealed. Geoffrey Bingham’s small book, *The Authority and Submission of Love* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1982), leaves the reader with the upending conviction that true authority and love are the same thing.

Ian D. Pennicook, *Power in the Church* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1997), says that the power we have is the proclamation of the gospel, not as ‘the mere imparting of information’ but as that spoken in ‘the wonder of the unity of the preachers with the one whom they proclaim’ (p. 62), who Himself in that word transforms the hearers, as He has already transformed the proclaimer.

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The Scriptures are replete with attributions of power to God:

Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O LORD.
For you repay to all
according to their work (Ps. 62:11–12).

It is interesting to note that God's 'power' here is matched by His 'steadfast love'. The parallelism of Hebrew poetry may even indicate that these two are one and the same thing. It is exercised here in the payment of just reward and retribution, and all are accountable to Him.

The power God has belongs to Him as the One who has created all things:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created (Rev. 4:11).

Thus David extolled the extent of God's power in all things:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name . . . For all things come from you . . . (1 Chron. 29:10–14).

The Son of God shares fully in this power, as 'He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (Heb.

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1:3). God's power is exercised particularly by God's action in Christ to save humanity and bring creation to its intended goal:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12).

Christ in this saving action is himself 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24). Christ 'was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Cor. 13:4). It is by virtue of this victory, and the judgements that come with it, that it is said of God:

... you have taken your great power
and begun to reign (Rev. 11:17).

This power is conveyed in the announcement of God's saving action. The gospel is itself 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom. 1:16). Paul also calls it 'the message about [of] the cross', of which he says:

... to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).

This is brought through 'by the power of the Spirit of God' (Rom. 15:19), when it is testified to by those who have received 'power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' (Acts 1:8), and who speak it 'not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (1 Thess. 1:5).

The references to innate human weakness or powerlessness apart from God (as in Rom. 5:6: 'while we were still weak'), such that 'All flesh is grass' (Isa. 40:6, RSV), highlight the reality that 'power belongs to God', and that any power exercised by human beings is God's, and derives from God.²

² Compare the related notion, 'there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God' (Rom. 13:1)—whether they exercise it poorly or well.

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Here, then, is a vast ‘power differential’, if we are going to see it in those terms. How does God conduct Himself in that? The Scriptures make clear that God exercises His power for the good of His creation:

Whilst we may see this power as awesome, it is also very gentle and tender. God is as concerned with a sparrow falling as He is with the might of a mountain. He knows every hair of a man’s head. Also His power is personal. Ephesians 1:20 tells us that God’s power works towards us. Ephesians 3:20 and Philippians 2:13 tells us that God’s power is working, or energizing within us. Romans 1:20 tells us that the whole creation beats out the message of God’s invisible nature. The visible things let us know God’s eternal power and deity. So Psalm 19:1 says that the heavens declare the glory of God.

There is another use of His power, which at first seems grim and even fierce. It is God’s implacable opposition to evil, and His determination to destroy it utterly and obliterate it from His universe. This may seem to be a negative use of power, but it works for a positive end—the entire renewal of all things which He has created . . . God, using His power to create, uses it also to sustain and renew, and bring to perfection that which He has created.³

This is well expressed in ‘the last words of David’ where, by revelation from God, the true exercise of human power is modelled on that which has been experienced from God:

The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.
Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,

³ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Weakness of Man and the Power of God*, pp. 1–2.

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ordered in all things and secure.

Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?
But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;
to touch them one uses an iron bar
or the shaft of a spear.
And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot
(2 Sam. 23:3–7).

The true exercise of power—the way God goes about it, and the way those who know and fear God go about it—benefits those towards whom it is exercised, like the sun coming up in the morning, and like the rain on the grass (compare Matt. 5:45). It also clears out whatever is evil, without compromising with it or being tainted by it.

LET US BREAK THEIR CHAINS, AND THROW OFF THEIR FETTERS

This positive view of God's power and its exercise has been deliberately misinterpreted and misconstrued by human beings in their sin. Humanity's catch-cry is now that of the rulers and peoples of the earth who have set themselves against God and His Messiah:

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
'Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us' (Ps. 2:1–3).

We now tend to view and misrepresent God through the distorted lens of our sin-determined experience and our own

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misuse of power. We see God's power over us as oppressive, even abusive, and as that which can and must be shaken off.⁴

This is particularly so when God is spoken of in connection with judgement. For some it has become commonplace to deride any notion of a God who brings suffering or judgement to bear. This is even characterised as the promotion and perpetuation of power abuse in relationships. Some who have experienced abusive human relationships are not willing to contemplate a relationship with God—especially not as Father—on the basis of this misunderstanding.

Those of this opinion who wish to retain some belief in God find themselves obliged to recast their understanding of God to exclude any participation on God's part in the bringing of suffering and judgement. This necessarily discounts vast swathes of both the Old and New Testaments. Some settle for a God who empathises and suffers with us, but who cannot be held responsible for anything untoward that happens to us. P. T. Forsyth observes tellingly:

... a God who is merely or mainly sympathetic is not the Christian God... a sympathy which has no help in it mocks us with an enlargement of our own sensitive impotence, which means so much better than it can... We must have a sympathy that can not only help but save, save to the uttermost, save for ever, and not only bless but redeem. Nay, far more, we must have, for the entire confidence of faith, a sympathy that has redeemed, and already triumphs in a conclusive salvation... Even a loving God is really God not because

⁴ As in the song:

God's O.K.
'Cos He's my mate,
But there's one thing
That I hate:
There's gonna be
One hell of a fuss
If he thinks He's any better
Than one of us.
(*New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 283).

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He loves, but because He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace.⁵

Isaiah had no doubts about God's entire responsibility for both judgement and blessing:

... I am the LORD and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things (Isa. 45:6–7).

It is because God is in charge of both that He can be legitimately prayed to with regard to each, if the people would have it so:

The people did not turn to him who struck them,
or seek the LORD of hosts (Isa. 9:13).

A COSMIC CHILD ABUSER?

In particular, the understanding that God gave his Son up to suffering and death on the cross is characterised as abusive, and as promoting and justifying abuse. One prominent example of this is in the writings of Steve Chalke,⁶ Christian leader and social activist based in the UK.⁷ Chalke caricatures this

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood (1910), 1984, pp. 58–60.

⁶ Information in this paragraph and fn. 11 from:
<<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2005/05/is-atonement-child-abuse.html>>, and
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Chalke>, accessed 26th November 2007.

⁷ An ordained Baptist minister, Steve Chalke has been active for over twenty years in delivering housing, education, training, youthwork, and healthcare in countries around the world, and in 2004 was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his services to social inclusion. He is also the Chair of Stop The Traffik, a global coalition of over 700 charities in 60 countries that is working to stop the buying

understanding of the cross as ‘a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed’, and dismisses it as a ‘twisted version of events’ which is ‘morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith’.⁸ If any are presenting the action of the cross in that gross way, then let them take stock. But we may also be up against some who will seek to distort a legitimate biblical understanding of the action of the cross, as a way of not facing it, to avoid being confronted by it, or to pursue some other agenda.⁹

Some who take exception to the notion that God ‘did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us’ (Rom. 8:32)—that is, to death on the cross¹⁰—are so forceful in their objections, that we may be tempted to soft-pedal our own adherence to it. Such statements as: ‘Can anyone imagine a

and selling of people, and is the official holder of the Guinness World Record for the largest amount of sponsorship money ever raised by an individual through a single event, running the London Marathon, as well as becoming the fastest money-generating sportsperson in history, by raising over £1,855 million in 3 hours 58 minutes 40 seconds. One hesitates to take exception to something said by one with such a record. Nevertheless, each of us, whoever we are, is responsible for what we say, and can be held accountable for it.

⁸ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003), p. 182, cited in D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 185. Such a statement has provoked debate and division within evangelical Christianity, with such respected persons as John Piper, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, and N. T. Wright weighing in to the fray. We are happy to leave them to it, and do not wish to get onto the bandwagon with them, but simply to note that it is in the air.

⁹ J. I. Packer, perhaps rightly, calls it a ‘supremely silly . . . smartypants notion’ (*Penal Substitution Revisited*, <<http://www.reformation21.org>>). Even so, that this notion is increasingly held by numbers of serious-minded persons means that it is not going to go away easily.

¹⁰ The word for ‘gave . . . up’, *παρέδωκεν* *paredōken*, is the same word used by Paul in Rom 1:24, 26, 28 for the giving up of sinners to the outworking of what is in their hearts, in the action of God’s wrath. It is also the word used for Judas’ betrayal of Jesus in e.g. Luke 22:6. Compare Acts 2:23.

more obsessional phantasm . . . than that of a God who demands the torturing of his own son to death as satisfaction for his anger?’¹¹ and ‘a process in which one member of the community of God masochistically endures the excruciating pain that another member of the community of God sadistically inflicts on him’¹²—these can give us pause and make us consider whether our presentation of the action of the cross gives the lie to them, or plays into their hands.

Is there a way to think about this biblically and responsibly? How might we rightly present the action of the cross of Christ in a way that truly testifies to the love of God?—as in the first letter of John:

. . . God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8–10).

To receive that rightly will enable us to operate rightly in our relationships with each other:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11).

¹¹ Antoine Vergote, cited in Headley Beare’s précis of ‘Bringing Jesus out of Captivity’, chapter 1 of Diarmid O’Murchu, *Catching up with Jesus* (Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, 2005), in *Common Theology*, volume 2, number 6, Winter 2007, p. 11.

¹² D. Soelle, *Suffering* (Fortress Pr., Philadelphia, 1988), p. 27, cited in Dave Andrews, ‘The Crux of the Struggle—The Place of the Cross in the Process of Transformation’, Zadok Paper S114A, Winter 2001, p. 1. Dave Andrews, his wife Ange, and their family, have lived and worked in intentional communities with marginalised and disadvantaged groups of people in Asia and Australia for the last thirty years.

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *What is our attitude towards God's power: both as 'gentle and tender . . . personal', and as that 'which at first seems grim and even fierce'?*
- *How has the notion of God as an abuser of power impacted our faith? How would we formulate a response to it?*