

STUDY 15

The Power of the Weak

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POWER BELONGS TO GOD ¹

Having described the fall of the great city Babylon, John then describes the judgement doxology of heaven. He writes:

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! *Salvation and glory and power belong to our God*, for true and just are his judgments (Rev. 19:1–2, NIV).

Power belongs to our God. In fact, God can be referred to as ‘the power’, for example, ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of *the Power* [τῆς δυνάμεως, *tēs dunameōs*]’ (Mark 14:62; Matt. 26:64). As author and creator of all things, God is the power, and power belongs to God and not to man.

THE ONTOLOGICAL WEAKNESS OF HUMANITY

In contrast to the powerful creator, every creature is weak. ‘Weakness is not a fault since we were created and so re-created for total dependence upon God.’² As sinful human beings we want to be ‘like God’ (Gen. 3:5) and so we grasp for power in order to be ‘like God’ and to be independent of God. We want to have power over our lives and the lives of others but we do not want anyone to rule over us.

GRASPING FOR POWER

Even though we might acknowledge our dependence upon God and declare Jesus Christ as Lord, in this life as forgiven sinners and fallen humanity we continue to grasp for control and power as we struggle to live ‘victoriously’.

In examining the forefathers of postmodernism, Erickson³ refers to the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his insight into power. Foucault, a person whose

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Ian Pennicook, 2007. Unpublished Notes for Ministry School Speakers.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2001.

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lifestyle we would not wish emulate in any way,⁴ studied ‘power and the way it is used to control populations, specifically in mental institutions, hospitals, and prisons’.⁵ Contrary to our understanding of truth being ontological,⁶ Foucault exposes the world’s understanding of truth and its relationship to power and knowledge. While it is said that knowledge is power, Foucault claims that there is a reciprocal action in which power creates knowledge by decreeing what is true.⁷ Truth is not ontological but ‘truth is a thing of this world’, the product of those who wield power. Such *political power* determines truth by including or excluding certain knowledge according to its own criteria (e.g. Science) and ‘controls the thoughts and behavior of individuals within the society’.⁸

In grasping for power within the church we seek to control our own circumstances, secure our own positions and exert control over other people. In coming to power we then create our own truth in the face of God’s revelation. Good examples of this are seen in the continuing debate about accepting homosexuality as a normal and proper way of life, and in the ordination of practicing homosexuals into the ministry of the church. To be able to argue for such practices first requires that we redefine our understanding of the inspiration of Scripture and the validity of the traditional boundaries of canonicity (39 + 27 writings). For some, this means that the Jewish and Christian canons are deemed relevant for their day, but are now in need of redefining in terms of content and perhaps being rewritten to make them culturally relevant for this generation. In our wisdom and by our great power, we sit in judgement of the canon of Scripture which the church has accepted as the revelation of God, the written word of God. The vote of the majority of our wise spiritual leaders will determine what God has to say, and God—the loving God whom we have created, who excludes no one—will give approval to all that our hearts desire.

This is what Foucault calls *political power*. It is human power creating human truth and it operates in the face of, and in denial of, the God revealed in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The presence of *political power* in the church is a sign of the human rejection of God, but it is also a consequence of the action of God’s holy wrath:

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom. 1:20–25).

The establishment of *political power* is not always this audacious or bold. Our grasping for power may also be subtle and is frequently justified by a blanket of

⁴ M. J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences* (pp. 133ff.), describes Foucault as a father-hating, sadomasochistic homosexual who despised religion and all authority.

⁵ M. J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, p. 134.

⁶ God is himself truth and all his ways are true (Jer. 4:2; 10:10; Dan. 4:37; John 14:6; 16:13).

⁷ M. J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, pp. 142f., and fn. 2 on p. 149.

⁸ M. J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, p. 149, footnotes 5, 6, 7.

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misappropriated biblical texts. Some examples of this may be seen in movements as diverse as Christian political activism, prosperity teaching, Christian perfectionism, the church growth movement, and the signs and wonders movement which includes spiritual warfare teaching, to name a few. I will now make a few brief comments on some of these.

While Christians ought to be involved in the life of the community as ‘salt’ and ‘light’, Christian political activism is structured *political power* designed to overcome the enemies of Christ. Michael Horton reminds us that:

The kingdom of Christ is not advanced by the legislation of ideology but by the proclamation of theology, namely, the gospel of God’s grace in Christ. When moralism replaces confidence in the saving work of Christ, the church not only fails to transform the moral life of the culture, it actually serves the process of secularization . . .⁹

The church growth movement has many virtues, yet it has a ‘sociological base’ and the danger is that its *methods* eventually bury the *message* in obscurity.¹⁰ ‘The new wave of leadership technique’, or seeking to address the ‘felt needs as a primary means of evangelism’ may soon see the pastor becoming ‘a slave to the marketplace’, catering to its selfish goals, no longer confronting people ‘with the serious issues raised by the gospel (sin and grace) and the calls to discipleship’.¹¹

In the signs and wonders movement, also referred to as ‘the third wave’ and ‘power evangelism’, ‘proclamation of the good news is not enough. The Christian must be able both to show and to tell in order to engage in power evangelism’.¹² To ‘show and to tell’ is to engage in ‘power encounters’; casting out demons, healing memories, healing the sick, and so forth. The evangelist is able to call down the Spirit to perform these acts.¹³ Healing and prophecy appear to be learned skills, developed by following certain procedures.¹⁴ Armstrong, acknowledging the movement’s valid insights, says that ‘Fascination with power is replacing serious interest in the actual content of the gospel’, and that ‘personal experiences often replace biblical exposition and exegetical defenses’.¹⁵

Ian Pennicook makes the following observation: ‘The triumphalism which is not of faith is so often an attempt to deny the fact that we are weak in and of ourselves (and even as redeemed we cannot move beyond Romans 7)’.¹⁶

THE NATURE OF THE POWER OF GOD REVEALED IN THE WEAKNESS OF GOD

Paul spoke of the foolishness and the weakness of God (1 Cor. 1:25). His foolishness and weakness are displayed in the death of his Son Jesus. Jesus the Son of God was himself ‘crucified in weakness’ (2 Cor. 13:4). Yet the cross, this seeming act of

⁹ Michael Horton, ed., ‘Introduction’ in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* Anzea Publishers, Homebush West, 1993, p. 16.

¹⁰ Bill Hull, ‘Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?’ in *Power Religion*, chap. 6, p. 142.

¹¹ B. Hull, ‘Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?’ p. 144.

¹² John Armstrong, ‘In Search of Spiritual Power’, in *Power Religion*, chap. 3, p. 68.

¹³ J. Armstrong, ‘In Search of Spiritual Power’, pp. 67–9.

¹⁴ J. Armstrong, ‘In Search of Spiritual Power’, pp. 73f.

¹⁵ J. Armstrong, ‘In Search of Spiritual Power’, p. 84.

¹⁶ Ian Pennicook, 2007. Unpublished Notes for Ministry School Speakers.

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weakness, demonstrates a wisdom and power of God quite beyond the comprehension of the world or of the principalities and powers of darkness (1 Cor. 2:8). The victory of God and of his Christ are demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. By his death we are saved; in his death the just requirements of the law of God were satisfied; Satan and the principalities and powers were defeated. Forgiveness of sin, made possible at the cross, and regeneration by the Spirit, give birth to hope and new life for sinful humanity.

The power of God is his power to love: it is the power unveiled in giving that which was most dear to him. The power of God is the power of justice not overlooked, but worked out through suffering; it is the power of holy wrath bearing and consuming sin. The power of God is the power of forgiveness that reconciles and restores the damned to joyful life in Christ as dearly loved children of the Father.

JESUS THE MAN, HIS WEAKNESS AND HIS POWER

Before the worlds were made, there never was a time when the eternal Son was independent of the Father. Father, Son and Spirit are one in being, in mind and in purpose. The Son was eternally dependant on the Father as sons are created to be. We may presume that the words of Jesus in John 5 describe his relationship with the Father from eternity, not just in this life. He said, ‘the Son can do nothing on his own’ (John 5:19). He can only do what he is given to do and only what the Father teaches him. ‘The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished’ (5:20). In his incarnation, God the Son took upon himself the weakness of humanity in that he became truly man. He lived as dependent man but still true Son.

When he spoke and acted in his Father’s name, those who heard and saw him were astounded, for he spoke with authority (Luke 4:31, 36). As man he had no innate power, but only that derived from and given by Father God. He did not grasp for power or independence as we the fallen children of Adam have done. Nor did he conjure up power of his own to heal the sick and cast out demons. He made it clear that Satan had no power over him because he lived under the command of the Father:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (John 14:30f.).

His dependency on the Father is also illustrated in the story of his temptation as he replied to Satan, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”’ (Matt. 4:4). As man, living in and under the word of God, he did what he did at the command of God and so in the power of God.

Ralph Martin reminds us that ‘Christ’s weakness, as exhibited in the crucifixion, is not the result of a lack of power . . . When Christ chose the cross, he did so because he was acting in God’s power’¹⁷ (see John 13:3, 7). It was the command and empowering of the Father that enabled him to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:17f.).

¹⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC, vol. 40, Word Books, Waco, 1986, p. 475.

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As eternal Son of God, his dependency extends beyond death into resurrection life, for we are told that, ‘he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God’ (2 Cor. 13:4). His living by the power of God is not just a reference to his resurrection, but to the life that he now lives. Martin continues:

But the cross is not simply a past happening; it is caught up in his present, risen life where he remains as the crucified one . . . the cross [is] not a station on the way to his final glory, but the *esse* of that lordship, so that always his lordly power is conditioned by his continuing weakness, obedience, and humility.¹⁸

THE CHRISTIAN—LIVING IN WEAKNESS AND IN POWER

Like the incarnate Christ, redeemed humanity can do nothing on its own. Even our life is not of our own making, it is a gift of God and of Christ, who has been given the power of life by the Father (John 5:26).

As the command of God was the power of God by which Christ lived, so it is that man shall ever live, ‘not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). Our power to work or to play, our power to learn or to communicate, to rule or to love, depends entirely upon the command of God. As Christians we should understand this and not be ever seeking power to do our own will, be our own person or fulfill our own destiny. The power to minister is the power of God made known in our weakness just as it was in the life of Christ:

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God (2 Cor. 13:4).

THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS—WEAKNESS AND POWER

Recounting his prayer for healing from the ‘thorn in his flesh’, Paul tells of the answer that he received from the Lord: ‘He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in *weakness*”’. Louw and Nida suggest the translation, ‘my power is greatest when you are weak’.¹⁹ Paul continues:

I will all the more gladly boast of my *weaknesses*, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with *weaknesses*, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am *weak*, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9f., RSV).

The power by which Christians minister and live lies not in anything that can be learned or conjured up—that could only be the application of worldly wisdom or some kind of occult power. It is the power of God, controlled by God and given by the Spirit as he wills to those who are in Christ to enable them to hear and to do the word of his command.

¹⁸ R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 475.

¹⁹ Louw & Nida Lexicon—electronic edition. Note 74:23 on the Greek word *astheneia* (ἀσθένεια), weakness: A literal rendering of this expression in 2 Cor. 12:9 may not be meaningful, and in fact can be quite misleading. δυνάμις is best interpreted as ‘God’s power’ and ἀσθένεια as the weakness which Paul experienced. Therefore, one may be able to translate as ‘my power is greatest when you are weak’ (see Today’s English Version).

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The following texts tell the story as it is.

- **Beyond all hope we have been saved:**
While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6).
- **In our weakness we are empowered to prayer:**
Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26, RSV).
- **In weakness we come with boldness to the throne of God:**
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:15–16).
- **Incompetent and lacking in worldly wisdom, we are called to proclaim the wisdom of God:**
God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27).
- **The Holy Spirit perfectly equips us for ministry:**
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses (1 Cor. 12:7–11).
- **In weakness we go by faith in the name of Jesus:**
And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you (Acts 3:16).
- **In weakness we go in the power of God:**
Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:1).
- **In weakness we see the victory of God:**
I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you (Rev. 3:8–9).

THE CALL TO BATTLE—THE WEAPONS OF POWER

It is true that we are called to struggle ‘against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 6:12b).

We must be careful to understand the nature of this warfare. God’s purpose is to bring all creation into harmony in Christ (Eph. 1:10). To this end, the resurrected Christ has already been seated at the right hand of God and given authority over the

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principalities and powers (Eph. 1:20–23), who were soundly defeated at the cross (Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:13–15), but not yet finally restrained. Until Christ comes again these dark forces of evil will attempt to thwart the purposes of God. It is against this defeated enemy that we are called to stand, not in fear, but ‘strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power’ (Eph. 6:10).

We are to stand by putting on ‘the whole armor of God’ (6:11). That is the armor that God himself wears as the Lord of the battle.²⁰

From the perspective of the world this equipment is weak, foolish and useless. The armor consists of truth, righteousness, the preparation of the gospel of peace (living out the peace produced by the gospel²¹), and faith. These four pieces of armor appear to be subjective qualities,²² and we are also to receive objective gifts: the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Our dependence upon God is signalled by the need for constant prayer. The use of human *political power* is not on the agenda. In weakness we know that our God reigns and power belongs to him.

Ian Pennicook has commented:²³ ‘While recognising a certain truth, the little chorus—“He is building a people of power”—may perhaps be better if it said, “he is building a people of weakness”’:

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).

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name (Ps. 63:1–4).

²⁰ For a full exposition see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC, vol. 42, Word Books, Dallas, 1990, pp. 448f., 456ff.

²¹ A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 457.

²² A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 457.

²³ Ian D. Pennicook, *Power in the Church*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1997, p. 69, note 7.