

Getting to the Root: Power

One of the marks of apostasy throughout this age is that there will be those:

...having the appearance [or form] of godliness, but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

And, as Paul categorically stated it:

The kingdom of God does not consist in talk [or chat] but in power (1 Cor. 4:20).

Before we come to the particular, a look at the general.

In the profession of Christ, there are three things: ‘appearance’ (or form or image), ‘talk’ (or chat), and ‘power’. We can have appearance or image, we can have talk, we can have both; but the great essential is power. The sober truth is that appearance and/or talk is no guarantee of power. But without power, we have nothing and we are nothing as far as the profession of Christ is concerned. We have the veneer, but not the reality; the varnish may shine, but it is only base metal or cheap wood.

Clearly, ‘power’ is a key new-covenant word. It has to be. Not only do we have these two verses, but, even more fundamentally, since we are in the age of the new covenant – the age of the Spirit – ‘power’ must be the word; spiritual power, that is. The presence and power of the Spirit is the hallmark of the new covenant, clearly distinguishing it from the old.¹

John the Baptist’s declaration:

I baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will

¹ See my ‘Paul’s Answer: The Spirit’ in my *False*.

Getting to the Root: Power

clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:11-12; see also Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).

Then we have Christ's assertion, and John's explanation. *First*, Christ's declaration:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'.

Then, John's explanation of this vital assertion:

Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

Again, Christ's promise:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper [that is, the Spirit] will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).

And the coming of the Spirit spelled power!

We have Christ's promise and command to his disciples when he was preparing them for their work in the new age:

And Jesus came and said to them: 'All authority [or power] in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:18-20).

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark. 16:15-16).

What a massive undertaking – worldwide evangelism – something far beyond any human resource to accomplish! To equip his disciples for it, Christ gave them his promise of power:

Getting to the Root: Power

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49).

[Christ] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said: 'You heard from me; for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:4-8).

And it wasn't long before the Spirit descended upon them, immediately demonstrating his power in and among his people by the conversion of three thousand Jews under Peter's preaching that very same day (Acts 2).

And then there was the miraculous cure of the beggar at the Beautiful gate of the temple. Peter explained to the crowd which had gathered in amazement:

Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? (Acts 3:12).

And power was the chief anxiety of the Jewish authorities who felt threatened by what was happening: 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' they demanded of Peter and John. 'Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them':

Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well.

Getting to the Root: Power

In short:

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:7-10,33).

And they were not alone:

Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8).

And so it went on until, in his letters, Paul set out the principles of 'power', the power that had been shown throughout the Acts in the preaching of the gospel, not least in his own preaching:

Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power... We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18,24; 2:3-5).

Again, when dealing with his opponents at Corinth, he majored on power:

I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Cor. 4:19-20).

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God... (2 Cor. 6:3-10).

Getting to the Root: Power

Writing to the Thessalonians, he said:

We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:4-5).

And in his second letter to the Thessalonians he returned to the subject of power:

We always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:11-12).

To Timothy:

God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God (2 Tim. 1:7-8).

So much for the general principle. One of the leading marks or characteristics of the new-covenant age is power. But what, specifically, are we to understand by ‘power’ in the two verses in question? Here they are again:

...having the appearance [or form] of godliness, but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

And:

The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Cor. 4:20).

Probing the meaning of ‘power’ – the great essential – in these two verses will be the subject of the next chapter. Because Paul has said far more about power in the Corinthian letters than in his letters to Timothy, I regard the Corinthian passage as key – and so I start with it.