

Power and Weakness

- *strength perfected by powerlessness?*

POWER & POWERLESSNESS

What is power?

Power is 'the ability to do something (anything) within the realm of the physical, mental, spiritual or legal ...', such as:

- Being able to act so as to make something happen
- To bring about change or an event
- Authority, ability, influence, force, potency etc

Power is an existential reality. It exists as part of the essential created nature of things; you can neither reject it nor abolish it, our only choice is how we use it. This being true, it places a clear responsibility on Christians to give time to discover, understand and experiment with character and qualities of authentic power. Especially because of the impact it has both on the user and the members of the community that experience its effects.

Where is power?

Power is found in an infinite number of power structures and networks and 'power people' who work within them and manipulate them, such as:

- Government:
 - What you *say* makes things happen
 - Parliament, law courts, police, local authorities, army etc
- Economy
 - What you *have* makes things happen
 - Landowners, industrialists, banks, building societies, companies etc
 - Skills, resources, finance
- Society
 - What you *are* makes things happen
 - Media, education, experience
 - Family, friends, contacts, status, language, personality, self-confidence, self-image etc

What is powerlessness?

What does it mean to be powerless?

- Unable to change circumstances and meet needs, to fulfil potential and hopes
- Read: Job 16:6-17:16; 24:1-12



Who is powerless?

Those who are trapped within the power-systems, exploited by them, vulnerable to them, or unable to move and act in a way that enables them to meet their needs or fulfill their hopes and desires. Such as ...

- Children
- Aged
- Sick
- Disabled
- Unemployed
- Unskilled
- Uneducated
- Ethnic minorities
- Immigrants
- Prisoners and their families
- Single parents
- Refugees
- Slaves

GOD AND POWER

Sourced in God

Across all cultures and nations the shared idea of God is of the divine being omnipotent in majesty and power:

“Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power and 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 honour come from you and you rule over all.
In you hand are power and might,
And it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all.”
(1Chron 29:11-13)

‘No authority except from God’
(Rom 13:1)

Demonstrated in Jesus

‘ ... in him all things were created ...
whether thrones or dominions
or principalities or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him
He is before all things and in him all things hold together’
(Col 1:15-17)

‘All authority in heaven and earth given to me’
(Mat 29:18)



Usurped by evil

‘For we are not contending against flesh and blood,
but against the principalities’
against the powers,
against the world rulers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.’
(Eph 6:12)

‘Again the devil took him to a very high mountain,
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them;
and he said to him,
“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

(Mt 4:8-9)

Disarmed by Jesus

‘He disarmed the principalities and powers
and made a public example of them,
triumphing over them in him’
(Col 2:15)

‘... and he has put all things under his feet
and has made him head over all things for the church’
(Eph 1:22)

‘Now is the judgement of this world,
now shall the ruler of this world be cast out’
(Jn 12:31)

GOD AND POWERLESSNESS

Profound powerlessness

One characteristic that popular thinking does not associate with God is ‘weakness’ and ‘powerlessness’; but this is an essential area of mystery and truth about God, and about our relationship with God and divine interaction with the world, which it is vital to examine.

As we explore the biblical understanding of power we discover that:

‘At the centre of all power there is weakness
and at the centre of all weakness there is power’

Building on this, a New Testament understanding of true power and genuine weakness, and powerlessness, reveals that powerlessness is not only at the centre of authentic power,¹ but that this understanding is essential for a true understanding and expression of power. God says:

“Power is made perfect in weakness”²
(2Cor 12:9)

¹ Cf for instance Mat 20:25-28, Lk 22:24-27, Jn 13:3-5, 12-15 and 2Cor 12:9-10

² These words will be examined in more detail below



This is a profound and exciting conundrum. Weakness is not a contrast to power but is to be found at the very heart of all true power.

So weakness is not the *opposite* of power, but rather an important *dimension* of God's power. It is revealed as God acts upon the earth and within the world. As a result of this, 'weakness' becomes something to be embraced by Christians as an astonishing opportunity to encounter, discover, explore, experiment and celebrate God's majesty and might. In fact there is something about 'weakness' that is essential to the very character of the nature of God's power. The actual experience of 'weakness' becomes a doorway of opportunity to engage with power in an authentic and unique way. Leading to an understanding of power that purifies rather than corrupts, that redeems rather than dominates and is full of surprise and possibility.

All this is counter-intuitive and quite difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, hidden within this paradox, there is not only mystery to be examined but also intrinsic truth. Here is subversive transformation that works according to principles that are hidden from most eyes, and as they are activated they provoke astonishment, incredulity and frequently shock. This is 'weakness' that is creative, spontaneous and relentless, all at the same time; but above all energised by a spirituality that is alive within Christocentric godliness.

Idea of weakness

There is a range of biblical uses of the word 'weakness'. In the Hebrew scriptures it usually has the sense of 'to stumble' (cf Ps 31). In the New Testament it is rarely used to refer to physical weakness, but rather to refer to the whole person. It has a range of emphases that identify human weakness and powerlessness:

- Contrast to God's power (cf Mt 26:41);
- Something to be overcome (cf Rm 15:1);
- Sense of sin (cf Rm 5:6);
- Physical sickness (cf Mk 6:56);
- Incapacity and impotence (cf Gal 4:9);
- Economic weakness and poverty (cf Acts 10:35).

Words about weakness

We begin with a spread of scriptures, which show that 'weakness', and 'powerlessness' are no barrier to God being able to accomplish both divine purposes and empower individuals. This is frequently the way God chooses to work and often expects us to work:

'Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
let the weakling say, "I am a warrior."
(Joel 3:10)

'The Lord is the everlasting God...
who does not grow faint or weary ...
who gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.'
(Isa 40:28-29)



'... encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.' (1Th 5:14-15)

'To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.' (1Cor 9:22-23)

'Resurrection ... it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.'
(1Cor 15:42-43)

'If I must boast I will boast in the things that show my weakness.' (2Cor 11:30)

'For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.' (2Cor 13:4)

Weakness perfects power

Embedded within this stream of biblical encouragement, which says that God will not only support and empower the 'weak' and 'powerless', but will often choose to walk and work as well; there are ideas that take us very much further. They point us towards the actual nature of power itself.

All power, and all the possibilities of power, comes from God (cf Mt 26:64; Jn 19:11). Here we hear a sustained call to actively embrace 'weakness' and 'powerlessness' and work with them, because they are at the very core of true power and are the quintessence of authentic authority. To the contemporary mind this seems absurd; but only by taking hold of them in the face of power and authority, and grasping them as the actual heart of power and authority, can we know real transfiguration.

Listen to these three passages:

1Cor 1:25-29

'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength ...
But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.
God chose what is low and despised in the world, the things that are not,
to reduce to nothing the things that are,
so that no one might boast in the presence of God'

Here we are presented with the radical counter-cultural, counter-intuitive nature of Christian values, behaviour and understanding. What the world, or the prevailing culture considers 'foolish' and 'weak' puts the perceived 'wise' and 'strong' to shame, by the power of God, which by its very nature has a totally different character and orientation than any human understanding of power.

2Cor 12:9-10

'... but (the Lord) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness."



So, I will boast all the more in my weakness
so that the power of Christ may dwell in me ...
for whenever I am weak then I am strong.'

The paradox of God's power, and therefore any manifestation of true power, is heightened even more by the phrase, 'power is made perfect in weakness' – is fully expressed, comes to perfection, demonstrated perfectly. Notice the absence of the phrase 'my power' that is often included in translations of this verse. It is omitted because in the best manuscripts the verse is talking about *all* manifestations of power not just divine manifestations of power - of course the source of all power is always God. The key factor in 'weakness perfecting power' is God's grace – the extravagant goodness and love of God. This is a key.

Rev 5:5-6

'Behold, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah ... has conquered ...
Then I saw between the throne four living creatures
and among the elders
a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered'

The juxtaposition of images here is breathtaking! The proclamation, the title, the symbolism! The lion is a messianic image (rooted in Gen 49:9) and it is the very example of strength and power. *But you turn and look*, the shock and horror; the one so titled is a standing slaughtered lamb! The ultimate picture of violated weakness; yet proclaiming total triumph – the lamb stands central, symbolic of true power.

The impact of these passages is overwhelming. All power comes from God but most manifestations of it in the world have been usurped. True power is only properly revealed through 'weakness', yet from a human perspective it is seen as flawed by 'weakness' at its core, and as a result it is despised and rejected. However, this 'weakness' is nothing less than the grace of God, which is expressed through meekness, kindness, gentleness, mercy and love. Its strength is that it has no breaking point and there is nothing beyond its reach. It is ultimately incapable of being overwhelmed and defeated. This weakness / power is so effective because it functions through the wisdom of the Spirit.

Symbols of powerful weakness

Some examples of powerful weakness are:

- Fragile snowflakes in a blizzard become snow drifts halting movement;
- Thin thread wrapped around someone many times immobilises them;
- Yeast kneaded into flour disappears, but it makes the bread rise;
- One drop of some deadly chemicals could contaminate a reservoir;
- Microscopic viruses can incapacitate a whole body and resist treatment;
- Tiny seedlings can break concrete;
- Bacteria can make cleansing agents impotent by mutating;

These are just a few to get you thinking differently and creatively, but don't try to push the spiritual analogy too hard!



POWERFUL POWERLESSNESS

'Speaking truth to power'

'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...
to reduce to nothing things that are'
(1Cor 1:27-28)

Central to the '*shalom* activist' mission is engaging with power. It involves living and acting in a way that 'speaks truth to power.'³ That challenges power to express itself in harmony with the values of *shalom*, yet resists peacefully, nonviolently⁴ and tenaciously if it fails in its duty to do that.⁵

This is the mission of the weak yet powerfully powerless followers of Jesus:

'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me'
because I am anointed to bring good tidings to the afflicted ...
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ...'
(Isa 61:1-2 cf Lk 4:8)

'God has put down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of low degree;
has filled the hungry with good things
and the rich have been sent away ...'
(Lk 1:52-53)

'Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.
Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.'
(Lk 6:20-21)

Subversive authority

Exercising authority is one of the primary examples of demonstrating power; look at the disturbing weakness in Jesus' words and example:

Jesus called them together and said,
'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,
and their high officials exercise authority over them.

³ This is a phrase coined by the Quakers in the 18th Century, which was taken up by them as a command. It has become a much more widely used concept (well beyond Quaker circles) since the publication of a Quaker pamphlet with that title in 1955 by the American Friends Service Committee.

⁴ The argument that 'there are no circumstances in which a Christian is ever justified in using violence' will be made in the section 'Peace & War' below

⁵ The question as to whether a Christian is ever justified in challenging political and social powers because they have been given by divine authority (Rm 13:1-7) will be discussed in the section 'Church & State' below.



Not so with you.
Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be your slave
- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served,
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'
(Mt 20:25-28)

Jesus said to them,
'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them;
and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.
But you are not to be like that.
Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest,
and the one who rules like the one who serves...
I am among you as one who serves.'
(Lk 22:24-27)

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power,
and that he had come from God and was returning to God;
so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing,
and wrapped a towel round his waist.
After that, he poured water into basin and began to wash his disciples' feet,
drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him...
When he had finished washing their feet,
he put on his clothes and returned to his place.
'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them.
'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am.
Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
you also should wash one another's feet.
I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.'
(Jn 13:3-5, 12-15)

What more is there to say?

Three brief observations:

- Subversive authority is true power, and is mediated through weakness and service, and 'rules' from the roots upwards;
- All authority comes from God (cf 1Chron 29:11-13); people who exercise authority have either taken it by force (for which they will be judged), or have been given it by others (for which they will be accountable);
- Authority is something *you have*; only you can give it, or withhold, it at will. You may be ordered, beaten or killed by others but they cannot be taken *only ever* given: -
 - Jesus says, "You would have no power over me ...' (Jn 19:11)
 - Hebrews says, "Be open to be persuaded by your leaders ... (13:17)

Assertive meekness

Jesus presents us with another astonishing subversion of power by apparent weakness;
just a few of many examples:



‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth
...the merciful, for they will receive mercy
... the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’
(Mt 5:5,7,9)

‘But I say to you. Do not resist one who is evil.
But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also;
and if anyone would sue you and take your coat,
let them have your shirt as well;
and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles’
(Mt 5:39-41)

‘But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’
(Mt 5:44)

This theme is continued in the rest of the New Testament, a few more of many examples:

‘Repay no one evil for evil ...
Never avenge yourselves ...
if your enemy is hungry, feed them ...
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’
(Rm 12:17,19-21)

Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless’
(1 Pt 3:9)

Nonviolence is at the centre of Jesus’ teaching, which again is perceived as ‘weakness’, but is actually the manifestation of ‘meekness’. This is not ‘pacifism’ but ‘shalom activism’! It is not actually non-violence (which is a non-statement) but ‘Assertive meekness’ that is ‘strength under perfect control’ which challenges and stands its ground offering the path of most resistance to hostility. Hence:

- Turning the cheek
- Stripping naked
- Going the second mile

There is nothing passive about this! This is subversive weakness – no wonder the meek shall inherit the earth!

Remember, the big powerful authoritative systems of this world are bound, while you; the insignificant, weak powerless community of *shalom* are free!⁶

The future is with us, because we are with Jesus, who is God!

Case studies ...

The remaining three sessions are case studies in power and weakness, and apparent powerlessness:

⁶ To paraphrase Walter Brueggemann in ‘*Living Towards the Vision*’ United Church Press 1976



- Church and state
- Crime and justice
- Peace and war

Each will demonstrate human manifestations of power, their rationale and apparent logic, but alongside we will illustrate alternative strategies that initially appear weak in comparison. However, we hope to show that in spite of their apparent powerlessness they in fact represent the authentic and godly solution.

Questions

1. In practical terms, how are God's words, "Power is made perfect in weakness" a message of hope to the powerless today?
2. Think of some practical examples of times when 'speaking truth to power' proved to be a significant
3. How can we help and enable people who feel powerless and helpless, and who have been crushed many times, to feel positive and develop hope about their situation?

