



The Proclamations of the Gospel: Nothing Less than Power for Salvation

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We are all fascinated with the concept of power. We can describe a movie, a concert, or even someone's personality as "powerful." When a disruption occurs in our electrical service we say that we have "lost power." But have we?

Electrical current is actually one of the least influential forms of "power" in our lives. Consider the roles played by the Niagara-like force of historically conditioned culture as it flows through our lives and the momentum of values such as patriotism and loyalty. And consider the power of our "need" for love in directing and misdirecting human relations. It can hardly be estimated. Such intangible forces of human power may be, in fact, some of the most difficult to comprehend and assess.

But even further beyond the boundaries of empirically measured physical power and the compelling tugs of socially construed influence is God's unpredictable and uncontrollable decision forming impact, a truly super-natural force that consistently frustrates any claims we might make to understand his mysterious choices. Therefore, when the survey writers in the PC(USA) Department of Research Services recently framed a Presbyterian Panel question exploring the extent of our belief in the authority of Jesus Christ and the unqualified force of his power, they may have asked the wrong question.

Asking whether "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved" clearly stepped beyond the biblical, confessional character of personal faith into a domain which is significantly more medieval. Such a question is theoretical, scholastic, and marked by a limiting, permissive tone. It could have been construed by many faithful Presbyterians as entirely ambiguous. It certainly did not engage the passion of those who could positively declare that they had "encountered the sovereign power of God in Christ over sin, death, and the devil," a far more traditional affirmation. And that, precisely and decisively, is the critical question today: Can we honestly profess our unwavering faith in the immeasurable, unpredictable, uncontrollable power of God, and is that what we affirm, unique and independent of all lesser physical and emotional power, in our commitment to representing the victorious, conquering, redeeming Christ? Our approach to that question will have everything to do with whether or not we have anything of significance to say to the currently prevailing culture and, ultimately, whether our denomination survives or perishes.

The power of the holy Trinity that comes into our lives through the Holy Spirit's application of the work of Christ is potentially so intriguing that it could be clearly seen as the magnet that draws persons into the most compelling intellectual search

imaginable. Taken from the historical context of the Church out of which they were wrenched, the core doctrines of the Christian community can be seen as the transparent windows through which the most amazing refractions of Christ's saving power are both delineated and depicted as he himself comes to grapple with the challenges that confront us. Such doctrines as those involved in Christology, justification, salvation, the atonement, etc. provide lenses through which the sparkling illumination of the Holy Spirit's power comes.

This power can normally be symbolized as Paul did in 2nd Corinthians 12 when he spoke of "inexpressible words" that cannot be spoken in conventional ways. This power reaches further depths in Colossians 3 in which readers are urged to "seek what is above" rather than what is on earth.

The text of Scripture and the doctrines of the Church become, as it were, verbal icons through which we are drawn into a different reality, perhaps what Paul refers to so curiously as a "third heaven." And who among us would not like to go there this very day? That is precisely what John Calvin invited us to do when he discussed our being raised far beyond the measurable limitations of our empirically observed lives into a mystic union with Christ. From within the spiritual force field of those relationships mysteries too great for words emerge. That brings us to the question of the proclamation of the gospel among those who know so much but who are not yet there.

Brian Greene, one of the brightest and most articulate physics professors at Columbia, a graduate of Harvard and Oxford, and author of the scientifically compelling book, *The Elegant Universe*, was quoted in the January 2010 issue of *The Atlantic* as arguing that life after death was implausible. He referred to the dying circuits of a defunct computer as the model of humans passing into nonexistence. "That is," he noted, "the brute, cold, hard fact of the universe."

The empirical project reaches its painful limits and a different kind of empiricism, a transcendent one open to broader mysteries, becomes a spiritual opportunity at this point. But it will not be easy.

The degree of the challenge is bluntly suggested by the cover story in the January 30 issue of *The Economist*. The cover pictures Steve Jobs calling our attention to his new iPad. His progressive, come hither smile beckons to us from where he stands cloaked in a sumptuous liturgical gown. Hanging around his shoulders like a contemporary pastor's idiosyncratic stole is a sash covered with minute hands that lift the forefinger signaling the evangelical indication for one way. Around his head a halo sends golden rays of quasi divine glory out to illumine the world. In the text of the article the author refers to the iPad colloquially as the "Jesus Tablet," and he remarks that when Steve Jobs blesses a market it takes off. The symbolism is obvious. It indicates that the most interesting source of creativity is expressed through a mythical link through solar paganism and that it surpasses the lordship of Jesus Christ. Who would have seen this impotence of the classic Christian doctrine of salvation to prevail in a confrontation with culture coming?

At least one did. And it was fifty eight years ago to be exact. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain, teaching at that time at Princeton, attacked the issue head on in an essay entitled "The Meaning of Contemporary Atheism." Maritain called for Christians to engage in a serious struggle for the meaning of the Church's faith. With the observation that from now on a "decorative Christianity" was not enough, he declared that to believe in God must now mean "to live in such a manner that life would not be possible if God did not exist." That is very close to the meaning of martyrdom. His essay concluded with a quotation from Blaise Pascal, "We always behave as if we were called upon to make the truth triumphant, whereas we are called upon only to struggle for it" (A Maritain Reader, 1966). There can be lots of decorative, triumphal drama going on, what John Calvin called reliance upon the "theatrical trifles" in worship services, but what Maritain saw as necessary was a diligent effort to expound the core doctrines of the Christian gospel with intellectual struggle, personal cost, and disciplined vocational service.

Did Paul also see it coming? In 1st Corinthians 1 he reminds people who may feel that they have become quite sophisticated that the message of the Cross is "the power of God for those who are being saved." On the other hand, those who regarded it as foolishness, wrote Paul, were the ones who were "perishing." Perishing. And what that means for us in our culture is an empirically oriented limitation of power and death.

Calvin centered the proclamation of salvation not around an argumentative, scholastic approach but around a very personal sense of mystical union with Christ. It was the core source of a transcendent power, implanted by the Holy Spirit, expressed in a death and revival of the soul, and productive of a clear grasp of the meaning of God as heavenly Father. It would eventuate in the conviction that a very strange and unanticipated exchange had occurred in this spiritual resuscitation in which Christ's life becomes ours before the bar of God's justice. Today we are given, in salvation, a radically different kind of armor. For the proclamation of the Christian gospel of salvation within a culture growing increasingly content with an atheistic posture involves a spiritual combat in which we may often fail but in which Christ will ultimately be victorious.

Ours is a mainline denominational culture where martial imagery and the summons to victory have been steadily removed from the congregation's devotional language, and we should confront that subversive tactic and deal with it very explicitly. Interestingly enough, we can look back to the verve of Jacques Maritain's style for clues. Converted to Roman Catholicism as a young adult, his deep intellectual drive was given direction from Thomas Aquinas' unhesitating way of challenging the heretical questions before the Church. With a model like Aquinas before him, Maritain showed absolutely no hesitation in confronting the philosophical nihilism and scientific materialism that were scornful of traditional Christian culture. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin were no less vigorous and combative in their day, and the additional models which they set before us, as different as their Church setting was from ours today, can still provide courageous and provocative examples.

In our day, we are more like prize fighters who have lost their courage than we care to admit. We eye our opponents warily, hesitant about stepping into the ring with them, hoping that they will see that we really affirm them as persons, and that they won't hit us too hard. The difficult thing about proclaiming the Christian gospel of salvation in a permissive and tolerant age is that we must be willing to declare that the opposite of salvation is to be lost into metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of life for which the Christian tradition has had the most excruciating and painful symbolic imagery. Justice is not to be ignored, sin is deeply imbedded in the ontological structure of our personal existence, responsibility for righteousness is unavoidable, and the fear of the Lord that is brought into fullness by love is still the beginning of wisdom.

There is the wilderness—always the wilderness waiting for us. And it is instructive to consider how often saints have felt called to abandon themselves to a fresh discovery of God's will in that wilderness. Could God be calling us to recover a new sense of his power by the humility that inevitably must be borne by any of us who find our way to some contemporary form of wilderness? Is it possibly our time to enter the wilderness, to leave behind the fragrant oasis where the low hanging fruits of neo-atheism, neo-immorality, and neo-pluralism have long been dangling around us, tempting us to taste their deceptively nuanced opinions and to become magically sophisticated in the eyes of our opponents, who in the end will be no more than serpents who are waiting to see us fall?

God's reality, Christ's commission, the consequence of the Holy Spirit's persuasive power; it always comes as a brutal jolt. There are struggles in which to be engaged, opponents to overcome, voices to hear, temptations to spurn, and Scripture to learn. It is within the disciplines of the training camp in some forlorn circumstances that we never wanted that the Lord meets us and prepares us to climb over the ropes and into the ring once again. It could all seem to be quite strange and unfamiliar. After all, sometimes a voice comes out of a burning fire, a Scripture passage rockets into our mind with great force, a light appears out of nowhere, a prison guard trembles, and the Word of God turns out to actually be sharper than a two edged sword within our trembling hands. If this does not entail spiritual warfare, the rising and falling of nations, what on earth would?

To refocus on some of the missing traditional imagery, the defeat of sin, death, and the devil is, of course, resisted. The battle is first launched against ourselves, in the wilderness, where there is no place to find refuge, where it is far less likely that we will be able to hide behind our degrees, our positions, our certifications, and our liturgical finery. But when we begin to find our strength again, we will have learned that when we rise to step into the pulpit or into the ring again, we will never be under powered or empty handed. And the warfare will be no less powerful for having been transformed into the most piercing form of love. That which has threatened the world with the darkness of sin and hate will, in the end, be renailed on that same cross on which Christ died. That is the power which the proclamation of the gospel switches on with the most magnificent light for the salvation of the world.