

**THE WEAKNESS OF GOD &  
THE POWER OF MAN.**

by

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NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.

PO Box 403, Blackwood, 5051

Adelaide, South Australia

1981

First Edition September 1981

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National Library of Australia card number and  
ISBN 0 949851 98 1

Cover Design by Glenys Murdoch  
Typesetting by Lorrie Randall  
Printed by John Skewes at:-

New Creation Publications Inc.  
Coromandel East, South Australia  
[www.newcreation.org.au](http://www.newcreation.org.au)

## THE WEAKNESS OF GOD AND THE POWER OF MAN

### Introduction

Almost a decade ago the question was asked, *'Must the pastor be a superstar?'* We have been taught to answer, 'No, he is not'. The superstar image, however, lingers on. It may undergo various metamorphoses, now presenting in this, or that shape, but still retaining its power.

Over recent days I have been shown yet again the vanity and the calamity of superstarring. 'I will be God's hands, God's feet, God's arrangements supervisor, God's evangelist'.

All for God's glory, of course! And we may strain to obtain, and to utilise all the power available so as to create great interest to make God's name famous.

The straight truth is that ultimately when all is said and done this power may accomplish little of lasting worth in the Kingdom of God. We may even be fighting God. Have you ever tried to outrun God?

Instead of superstar pastors the emphasis in our time may be on superstar churches. Instead of 'me-ism' it becomes 'us-ism'; like priest, like people.

The Word which I have for you concerns *'The Weakness of God and the Power' of Man*. We could speak of the weakness of man and the power of God. Maybe that's what you think I should have

said. I agree firmly that this also is true. Yet the apostle Paul, in I Cor. 1:25 states: *'The weakness of God is stronger than men'*, i.e. God's weakness is stronger than man's power. Hence, 'The weakness of God and the Power of Man', for Paul is expounding the power of weakness.

### I. True Power Belongs To God.

Repeatedly we are told of God's power in the Scriptures.

'Once God has spoken', says David, 'twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God' (Psalm 62:11). We see men and women confronted by the awesome power of the living God. The creation displays God's power. The power of God is always seen in his mighty acts, his judgments and deliverance. David again cries, 'Who knoweth the power of thine anger?' (Psalm 90:11) and the heavenly multitude cry 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.' (Rev. 19:1). God is known by his power.

How are we to understand this power of God? What kind of power is it? We are prone to view power abstractly, or metaphysically. Judging by some forms of Christian art God's great power is often more akin to the power structures of the civilisation or politics of the time, than to the biblical revelation. We see this same syncretism in much of today's hour of power approach to religion.

*God's power is that of the Creator-Redeemer.*

'Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist' (I Cor. 8: 6). "The uniqueness of God's power is exemplified must decisively in his power to exist" (G .D .

*Kaufman, "Systematic Theol.: A Historicist Perspective" p.151).* None of us has this kind of power. We cannot give ourselves being by our own efforts. God is in no way deficient. He gives life and breath and being to all things in order to finally redeem his children and his creation.

Hence God creates by his power, upholds all things by his word of power, and it is by this same power that God reconciles all things to himself in Jesus Christ.

*God's power is the action of dynamic love.*

It is not a naked force, but the love of the Father. It is the power of grace that has power enough to transform defiant, hateful rebels into willing sons. Love evokes a response rather than forces it. Not all the atomic energy of the creation, nor political tyranny, however absolute, can accomplish this. 'God is love' says John, and we are told that 'God is the God of all grace'. This means that all that he is and does flows from this fact.

This is the power through which all things are freely created. It is without motivation from outside itself. It is not power for its own sake, but power which is marked by sacrifice and gives itself for others. This is the powerful love which never fails, and must ultimately triumph. Here is the Almighty One, the One who cannot be overthrown.

'The weakness of God is stronger than men'.

### 2. Men and Women are designed by God to exercise power

*I mean, we are made to love.*

Created in the image of God, we are forged

out of the power of love. We are formed to know love and empowered by God to express love. God has given us dominion over the creation and given us vast powers to serve God, our neighbours and creation.

In this sense man's power is akin to God's, with the strong exception that man's powers are derived from God and, as such, are all the time dependant upon him.

*But man seeks power.*

Jesus speaks of this when he says, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them' (Matt. 20: 25). This is power for one's own sake. It is using our given powers in a reverse way. It flows from an irrational ambition to be as God in our own eyes and in the eyes of our fellows.

When we reject our dependency upon the grace of God, we are immediately made insecure. Therefore we must secure ourselves. We must make a name for ourselves. We cannot bear absurdity and are forced to build vast technological systems of power. We use our power to eliminate God from his creation, and to oppose him in all our religious seeking and asking. We stand under a roof that hides heaven from our eyes.

All such power, be it political or religious is really an illusion. If it is power without love, then it is negative, it cannot create anything; going the way of all flesh.

'The weakness of God is stronger than men'.

### **3. It is in his weakness that God has overcome the power of men**

*This was through the love of the Cross.*

To repeat Jesus' words from Matt. 20: 'You

know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; *even as the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*' (Matt. 20:25-28). It is by that giving up of his life, by his becoming the servant of all, by the power of sacrifice that the world is overcome.

Jesus became the Lord of weakness. This weakness was an affront to the religious who trust in the power of morality, and it was stupid to pagans who lean on intellectual' knowledge and political manoeuvring for power. The weakness of the Cross is grotesque, off-putting and offensive, so that to talk of the Cross being powerful is not the way to do Christian public relations.

Yet Paul insists that only this is that power of God which reconciles God to man and man to God. 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, *it is the power of God.*' (I Cor. 1:18). 'But 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 Cor. 1: 23f). When Paul says, 'Christ the power of God', he is not referring to a muscle power of Christ, a power that can do anything, but to the power of his weakness seen in crucifixion. The Cross has worked and continues to effect salvation in the lives of men and women.

*The Church at Corinth had forgotten this.*

They had a fervent belief in the power of a spiritual Christ, but had lost sight of the crucified man, Jesus.

Hence, in their congregation, emphasis was given to the power of knowledge. Intellectual one-upmanship, and the power of fluent speech were great qualifications. The powerful gifts of the Spirit given them by Christ for ministry had become a means of spiritual elitism and a means for gaining power over each other.

Therefore Paul needs to say, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.' (I Cor.8:1). Knowledge is a powerful accretion. It can thwart opponents and gain status. Does this imply that knowledge and theological knowledge in particular, is disavowed by Paul? I believe not, especially when knowledge or true knowing and wisdom is a gift of the God who knows. We are to love God with all of our minds. Our knowledge is to be a means of service and love. To disdain it is to refuse a means of love. But to gain it to use it for one's own ends is a form of hubris and pride, especially when one remembers that the God of all knowledge used his knowledge to create and redeem us as his sons.

*Jesus refused the temptation to use power for his own ends.*

The tempter put it to Jesus that he could gain power over people by turning stones into bread (Matt. 4: 4f).

The people of God, and particularly pastors and leaders of churches, face the same temptation today. We know we are to preach the gospel to every creature. There is a pressure to succeed. We have to 'create interest' in our message. There is the advertising and the media to utilise or to contend with. If we utilise it, then we have to make the gospel so appealing that our customers will buy it.

A former advertising agent for Coca-Cola who has transferred to advertising the gospel puts it,

'Back in Jerusalem when the church started, God performed a miracle there on the Day of Pentecost. They didn't have the benefits of buttons and media so God had to do a little supernatural work there. But today with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society'. (*Christian Science Monitor: 13/7/77*)

Advertising can be a form of manipulation. Perhaps Malcolm Muggeridge is right when he says that if Jesus had the opportunity to use prime time T.V. , he would refuse because he would never concede to using trickery. Jesus refused that kind of power.

Jesus does not yield to the crowds miracle mania to demonstrate his power by a sign from heaven. He does not use trickery or magic. He does not form a political band to enforce his power, even by calling down fire from heaven. At the last, when the Son of God could have called on 10,000 legions of angels to rescue him from the shame and ignominy of the Cross, he does not save himself.

*We are told that 'He (Christ) was crucified in weakness' (II Cor. 13: 4).*

As a Lamb, this one confronts and is confronted by all the power systems of man. As he faces Pilate, Jesus encounters the political might of collective man, the world making a name for itself, and out to crucify the true King.

Linked hand in hand with this autonomous humanism, Jesus also apprehends the most refined and cunning human effort to reach beyond himself. Man's religion and its power. In the Church and in all religion, man seeks to justify himself and maintain himself. In religion the world of mankind achieves the deepest expression of its falling away from God.

And more. In the weakness of his Cross, his hour, Jesus comes face to face with you and me. Our fists are clenched. Our eyes are darting. Our hate cannot contain itself and expends itself by nailing Christ to the Cross.

Of that Cross Jesus had said, 'Now is the judgment of this world, now is the ruler of this world cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'. Again, as he goes toward the Cross, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'. (John 12:31f, 16:33). God does not overcome the world with a big stick, by force of arms, but by the inexhaustible love of the Cross, which suffers all the guilt of all men, for all time, into oblivion and extinction.

It is not as though God became like this in Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us the glory of the Father, and in the suffering of that Cross, we see what he has always been. In the place where God's power is exhibited we see the weakness of God, but that weakness is what true power is, and we know that at the core of the universe, love reigns.

Paul says, 'For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (II Cor. 13:4). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a demonstration of the power of his death, which is the power of weakness, the triumph of grace, and it is this One who now reigns as Lord.

'The weakness of God is stronger than men'.

#### **4. It is in our weakness that God's living power is revealed.**

In contrast with other self-styled teachers in Corinth Paul shows that his pastoring was consistent with his message.

'When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty

words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God'. (I Cor. 2:1-5).

Evangelisation is not a technique, nor an exercise in technology. It is not a programme of learned patter. It is the proclamation of a message. It is our responsibility to teach; and to teach that message. As our people are liberated and healed by the message, they will not have to be harassed into discipleship classes, or berated into witnessing campaigns, for, in their weakness, the truth will be seen and heard.

*The weakness of God's servants becomes their strength.*

Remember Moses the Egyptian--trained Hebrew who tried to liberate his people by taking the law into his own powerful hands? It accomplished nothing. Years later, as one who had to use his brother to be his voice, Moses spoke the prophetic Word of God, and God did what he said liberating a nation.

Many more examples could be given. Some of you come from areas of deep resistance to the Gospel. Some of you may be going to churches where they have only one verse: 'Let nothing be done for the first time'. How do we fulfil our ministries? Not by trying to conquer for God, but by doing what God says and speaking the Word he has given us. We go with him.

Christ has given us the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of power. That is the Spirit of love. He has brought to us the renewing power of the Cross. Now, in dependency on this power of

weakness, we speak, and in our nervousness, frailty, fallibility and rich humanness, men and women will see, and know the love of God.

God says, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. (II Cor. 12: 9).

Yes indeed. For 'The weakness of God is stronger than men'.