

Power in the Church

Ian D. Pennicook

Power in the Church

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Living in the Kingdom

Maranatha!

The Baptism of John

The Riches of His Grace

The Shadow and the Substance

The Story of the Acts of God

Ian D. Pennicook

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— 1 —

When Paul declared that he was ‘not ashamed of the gospel’, he explained that it was because the gospel was ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (Rom. 1:16). He further explained that in the gospel ‘the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith’, and made a direct link between this present reality and the words of Habbakuk 2:4, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (1:17).

The question to which I want to turn concerns the nature of the power which Paul sees in the gospel, and so the power which the Church knows. What was it that took place when the gospel was preached which led Paul to make this declaration? In the light of the New Testament evidence, can we draw some conclusion as to the real nature of the power which we would insist is active in the Church today? This matter is not without its significance, especially in view of the assertions of many groups, large and small, which claim to have become the locus for the power of God over against what is regarded, by comparison, as a powerless church. But the claims may not necessarily indicate the true state of affairs. In other words, the purpose of this book is to discover both the nature and the range of evidence of the power of God.

It is important from the start that we understand the meaning of the word ‘power’ itself. The Greek word δύναμις (*dunamis*) is part of a group of words with the basic meaning of ‘ability’.¹ The verb

¹ W. Grundmann, ‘δύναμις κτλ’, in Kittel, G. & Friedrich, G., (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964, pp. 284–317; O. Betz, ‘Might, Authority, Throne’, in Brown, C. (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1976, pp. 601–6.

δυναμῶν (*dunamai*) is translated throughout the New Testament as ‘able’, ‘can’, ‘could’ and so on. As such it has no particular theological significance (see, for example, John 1:46, ‘*Can* anything good come out of Nazareth?’; 3:2, ‘no one *can* do these signs that you do’, etc.).

The noun δυναμῖς is found (about) 120 times in the New Testament¹ and some 250 times² in the LXX. In the LXX it is commonly used of military forces, as in Genesis 21:22, ‘At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his *army*, said to Abraham . . .’, or of ‘companies’ of people, as in Exodus 12:17, ‘You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your *companies* out of the land of Egypt’ (*NRSV*; *AV* has ‘armies’). It also means ‘resources’, as in Ezra 2:69, ‘According to their *resources* they gave to the building fund’ (*AV*, ‘abilities’). In Psalm 18:32 (LXX, 17:33), David wrote that ‘God [has] girded me with *strength*’, and he then proceeded to explain that this meant an ability in battle (v. 39).

Of course, any ability or strength which men and women may possess comes from God. Thus Psalm 21:1, ‘In your *strength* the king rejoices, O LORD, and in your help how greatly he exults!’ At this point the practice of simply using one Greek word to develop a doctrine must be seen as inadequate, for two reasons. First, we see that in the LXX δυναμῖς actually is used to translate a number of Hebrew words. That in itself should warn us against limiting the meaning we give to the word. Second, there is the use of another Greek word, ἰσχύς (*ischus*) to convey the idea of ‘strength’.³ Then,

again, we should also beware of assuming that what *we* mean by a word is what the Scriptures are saying. In this case some have noted that the English word ‘dynamite’ is derived from the Greek δύναμις. Of course it is, but the meanings are quite distinct. Without going into the distinction in detail,¹ we must say that the way to discover the meaning of δύναμις is to examine what Paul says about ‘the power of God for salvation’ as he proceeds to expound it in Romans and elsewhere.

THE NEW TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

What, we may ask, would Paul’s readers understand by ‘the power of God for salvation’? This may not be an easy question to answer from the New Testament, not because the idea is not present so much as because we cannot simply assume that Paul’s Roman readers could take out a copy of the New Testament and read it. To begin with, we have to assume that the letters of Paul probably pre-dated some of the Gospels. Then, we may also assume that the Gospel writers themselves may have used words with a careful theological purpose. In other words, the Gospel writers may have had a clear purpose in choosing the words they did. Nevertheless, when we look at the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, we see that the word ‘power’ (in both singular and plural) is used in a number of ways.

Firstly, δύναμις refers to the ‘power of God’. In Matthew 22:29 Jesus accused the Sadducees of knowing ‘neither the scriptures nor the power of God’. Here the issue was the resurrection of the dead; the ‘ability’ of God to raise the dead was not known. Jesus’

¹ *On-Line Bible/Strong’s Concordance*.

² A rough estimate.

³ See, for example, II Peter 2:11, where the two words are used together. There are other words which also appear to have overlapping meaning. Thus ἐξουσία (*exousia*) was translated as ‘power’ in the *AV* of John 1:12. As the various ranges of meanings are examined, so the number of synonyms grows.

¹ The equivalence of δύναμις with ‘dynamite’ is called by Don Carson a ‘semantic anachronism’; see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 32f.

explanation involved a brief discussion of God as the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. Of interest is the fact that the Old Testament has almost no reference to resurrection as the New Testament knows it. That will need to come after the resurrection of Jesus (cf. Rom. 4:17, where resurrection, apart from that of Jesus, does not exist—yet); in the meantime, there is the *implication* of the repeated statement of the Old Testament, and the corresponding knowledge which derives from intimacy with God: ‘If you knew God, you would know his power to do this’. Corresponding to this is the statement of the angel Gabriel to Mary, when, concerning the promised pregnancy, she asked ‘How is this to be?’ The answer was ‘the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’. In contrast to the Sadducees, the angel Gabriel had come from God (Luke 1:26) and so spoke out of the immediacy which he had in the presence of God. The same principle is seen in Jesus’ own ministry, when he returned to Galilee after his time of testing in the wilderness; Jesus was ‘filled with the power of the Spirit’ (Luke 4:14). We should note that ‘the power’ was also occasionally used as a periphrasis for God Himself (Matt. 26:64/).

Secondly, as a result of this, Jesus was a man with power himself (perhaps we ought to say ‘*the* man of power’). When he had cast out the demon from the man in Capernaum, the crowd in the synagogue were amazed and observed that ‘with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come’ (Luke 4:36). The reason he had this power was that the power of the Lord was with him (Luke 5:17). When the woman with the haemorrhage touched him, however, he was aware that ‘power had gone forth from him’ (Mark 5:30), and in Luke 6:19 we read that the crowds wanted to touch him, ‘for power came out from him and healed all of them’.

Thirdly, and consequently, δύναμις was the word used for Jesus’ miracles. Thus Matthew 11:20, ‘Then he began to reproach

the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent’ (also 21, 23; 13:54, 58; etc.). In Mark 6:2 the crowds were astounded that one from such humble origins could do such ‘deeds of power’, but Mark proceeds to indicate that the ability was not that of a magician with powers simply at his command; in the context of their unbelief, he was quite hindered:

And he could do no [οὐκ ἐδύνατο] deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching (Mark 6:5–6).

Matthew simply puts it that he *did not do* many deeds of power *because* of their unbelief (13:58).

Fourthly, Jesus gave the twelve power to do what he himself was doing:

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases (Luke 9:1).

And they did do those things, although they were conspicuously unaware of what was the true nature of the ministry he had. In Luke 9:40 the father of the demon-possessed boy complains that the disciples ‘could not’ cast out the demon. Mark’s longer version of this event records the disciples’ bewilderment at their inability, and Jesus’ response that ‘This kind can come out only through prayer’ (Mark 9:29). He did not mean that this particular *genus* (το; γενοϛ) of demon needed special attention, since he did not do anything different in his own action towards it than he had in any other situation. But he was saying that the disciples had not understood the nature of the power they had, because they had not understood the nature of his power. What he did, he did out of the intimacy which he had with the Father (cf. Mark 9:7; etc.). In consequence, they must function out of the same intimacy. That they did not understand this at all is seen in Luke 10:17–20 where, on this occasion:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

Perhaps the most telling explanation of this is to be found in Luke 24:49 where, even after they had witnessed the fact of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were warned not to go out, but to 'stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high'. Acts 1 links this directly with the gift of the Spirit. Without that intimacy, the source of Jesus' own power, as we have seen (Luke 3:21–22; 4:1, 14, 18–19), they could not be *his* witnesses.¹

Technical questions apart, the ministry of Jesus and the disciples was certainly 'powerful'. Great crowds followed him, principally because of the miracles which they had either heard of (Luke 4:37), or seen directly (John 2:23²). At times he could not enter towns because of the numbers of people who were thronging to him (Mark 1:45; cf. 2:1–2) and at others he was forced to sit in a boat in order to teach (Luke 5:1ff.). Familiarity with the stories of the Gospels should not hinder us from seeing the amazing impact of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. In his reply on the day of Pentecost, Peter said that the audience all knew of Jesus' signs and wonders, yet the audience included Jews visiting Jerusalem from all over the world (Acts 2:22). Later (although how much later is not clear³), Peter could address Cornelius in Caesarea

¹ We must stress that pre-Pentecost descriptions of the disciples' actions cannot, therefore, be in any way paradigms for their post-Pentecost ministries—or ours! Whatever our 'charismatic' expectations may be, that would be hermeneutically wrong.

² John does not use the word power (δύναμις), preferring to use the word 'sign' to describe Jesus' miracles.

³ Assuming that the details in Acts represent roughly the chronological order in which the events took place, the conversion of Cornelius still need only have been prior to AD 44, the year of the death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:20–23).

as one who knew at least the basic outline of the ministry of Jesus, in particular:

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38).

However, there was far more than the events of Jesus' ministry prior to his death; there was the phenomenal continuation of that ministry in and by the early church after Pentecost. The promise of Acts 1:8, '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', meant that by their receiving power (as promised in Luke 24:49), not only would they give witness to Christ, but also Christ himself would give his witness through them (cf. Acts 2:17–18; Rev. 19:10). So when the man in the temple was healed, Peter denied that he or John had any power of their own (Acts 3:12). The power for the healing lay in the name of Jesus (v. 16). This was the issue when Peter and John were arrested; they were asked 'by what power or by what name did you do this?' (Acts 4:7). Of course, 'the name' was no formula. Knowledge of 'the name' indicated knowledge of the person and so the privilege of acting on behalf of the person.

It is perhaps this which is significant in the observation of Acts 4:13:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.

It is conventional to refer to the 'companionship' as a thing of the past, that is, they had been companions and were now doing what

he had done. But is it also possible that behind the action lay, also, a far more recent ‘communion’? This seems likely when Peter is described as ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 4:8). Whether that was a special filling for the moment or the continuation of the state brought into being at Pentecost,¹ or both, the point is that the outpouring of the Spirit was specifically the result of the action of the risen and ascended Jesus (see Acts 2:33). So when Peter and John returned to the other believers, they prayed that the ‘Sovereign Lord’, the Creator, would give them the ministry of preaching the word boldly, and that the Lord would stretch out His hand to heal, that signs and wonders should continue to be done in the name of Jesus. Then the place in which they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God. We must understand that this outpouring of the Spirit was of the same quality as that at Pentecost, namely, the powerful action of Jesus.

All this means that there are repeated implications in the Acts that it was Jesus who continued to work in and through the Church in great power. It is probable that this is what Luke meant when he began the Book of Acts by saying that in the Gospel he recounted all that Jesus began to do and to teach prior to his ascension, implying that what he was about to chronicle was what Jesus was *continuing* to do and to teach.²

When Acts 4:33 records that ‘with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus’, we see that there were a number of elements. There was a significant response to the proclamation.³ The conversion of great

¹ Is this the implication of Ephesians 5:18, where the present tense carries a continuous meaning? ‘Go on being filled with the Spirit’ implies a commencement.

² See, for example, I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5, IVP, Leicester, 1980), p. 56.

³ cf. Robert H. Mounce: ‘How did people react to this kind of preaching? One thing is certain—they could not remain neutral. Wherever the apostolic *kerygma* was proclaimed there was either a “revival or a riot”’ (*The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960), p. 58.

numbers is quite specific—about 3,000 at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) rising to about 5,000 *men*.¹ Later more general information is given, as in Acts 11:21, ‘a great number became believers’ (also v. 24). The indication is of phenomenal growth, and the later accounts of Tacitus and Suetonius concerning the persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero, show that by the mid-60s the growth of the Church had made a significant impact on the capital city of the empire.

There were ‘powers’ in evidence which were of the same sort as those seen in Jesus’ ministry. Miracles of healing and exorcism (Acts 3:6–10; 4:30; 8:6–8; 14:8–10; 16:16–18; 19:11–12; 28:1–6, 8–9) took place, while some things happened for which there was no precedent in the Gospels. The release of Peter from prison (twice!—Acts 5:17–26; 12:1–11) is outstanding here. Events such as the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) and the blinding of Elymas (Acts 13:9–12) do, however, have a precedent in the Old Testament, a fact which the phrase ‘signs and wonders’ perhaps indicates.

In the Old Testament, the phrase is used principally to describe the exodus from Egypt, with the associated judgments, the plagues, and the great deliverance at the Red Sea (cf. Exod. 7:3; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; 34:11; Neh. 9:10; Ps. 78:43; 135:9; Jer. 32:20, 21). If this is the source of the phrase, then we may understand the use of the same phrase in Matthew 24:24 (Mark 13:22//) to mean that Jesus was warning against those who would claim to be deliverers and who would attempt to validate their claim

¹ The Greek is specific that it was *men* (Gk. ἀνδρῶν) as distinct from women and children, and not *men* in the sense of ‘human beings’. A similar detail is given in Mark 6:44, where ἀνδρῶν is used, and Matthew 14:21 confirms that the 5,000 were men ‘besides women and children’. See F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1954), p. 96, n. 6.

by means of ‘signs and wonders’.¹ In contrast, Peter claimed that it was Jesus who actually did so:

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know (Acts 2:22).

Furthermore, the disciples, particularly the apostles, continued to do ‘signs and wonders’ (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8. Stephen is the exception—14:3; 15:12). In Romans 15:18–19, Paul pointed to ‘signs and wonders’ as a part of the action of Christ through him (cf. I Cor. 12:10; Gal. 3:5), while in II Corinthians 12:12 he insists that these were ‘the signs of a true apostle’.

A further element, related to the response of faith, was the evidence occasionally described as associated with it. We may observe that the first outpouring of the Spirit in Acts resulted in ‘the gift of tongues’ and prophecy (Acts 2:4, 17–18); Peter later identified the similar falling of the Spirit upon Cornelius and his group as being the same as that which the Church received ‘when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Acts 10:47; 11:17). While these expressions are not mentioned as taking place among the crowd who responded at Pentecost, although ‘praising God’ (Acts 2:47) may well point to the *substance* of the gift of tongues, Peter did indicate that they (too) would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Certainly there is a community formed, the internal dynamics of which are consistent with the promises of such passages as Isaiah 35:

¹ For evidence of those who later did precisely that, see Josephus, *The Jewish War*, passim. The question may be raised concerning the date of the authorship of the Gospels and Acts; were they written, among other reasons, to indicate that among the many claimants to messianic status, all of whom are described by Josephus as failing to substantiate their claims, there was one who did do ‘signs and wonders’, Jesus? The use of the word ‘signs’ in John’s Gospel may have a similar purpose.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
 the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
 like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
 and rejoice with joy and singing.
 The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
 the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
 They shall see the glory of the LORD,
 the majesty of our God.
 Strengthen the weak hands,
 and make firm the feeble knees.
 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
 ‘Be strong, do not fear!
 Here is your God.
 He will come with vengeance,
 with terrible recompense.
 He will come and save you.’
 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
 and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
 and streams in the desert;
 the burning sand shall become a pool,
 and the thirsty ground springs of water;
 the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
 the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
 A highway shall be there,
 and it shall be called the Holy Way;
 the unclean shall not travel on it,
 but it shall be for God’s people;
 no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
 No lion shall be there,
 nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
 they shall not be found there,
 but the redeemed shall walk there.
 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
 and come to Zion with singing;
 everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

And Isaiah 43:14–21:

Thus says the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
For your sake I will send to Babylon
and break down all the bars,
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.
I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Both these passages envisage a second great exodus (cf. Matt. 1:21; Luke 9:31), so that the Church which was formed by Christ (Matt. 16:18) was nothing less than the fulfilment of Israel's identity and purpose.

The three outpourings of the Spirit—Pentecost, Samaria and Caesarea—coincide with the dimensions of the witness of the apostles described in Acts 1:8 and are the three occasions when Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles come into the people of God. 'Salvation is of the Jews' (John 4:22), but is not restricted to them. The nations, then, will come to Zion for true instruction, true *Torah* (Isa. 2:1–4), and this is what takes place; true teaching takes place (John 6:45; I Thess. 4:9). Doubtless this is the reason why the Church 'devoted [itself] to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42).

The coming of the Spirit upon the Church, and upon its individual members, brought the gifts *of Christ* to the Church (see Eph. 4:7ff.). The various gifts which come are not incidental; they are an essential feature of the Church as 'the body of Christ'. They are intended to be the way the Church, as the body of Christ, functions. While not every gift in the Church is of equal importance (see I Cor. 14:1; etc.), the New Testament describes a church in which gifts *of necessity* are in evidence. Paul's response to the misuse of the gifts, especially an over-emphasis on tongues in Corinth, is never to suggest the *disuse*. Indeed, quite the opposite; he actually forbids a prohibition on tongues while urging the Corinthians to correct their priorities.

To construct a list of the gifts of Christ in the Church is probably pointless. The way they are described leaves no doubt that there was an element of '*ad hoc*-ery' about some of them. They were gifts to meet the need. All we have are the lists of Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and I Peter 4. However, we may assume that these lists were *descriptive* and not *prescriptive* (there is no command to have all these gifts in the Church), and that they indicate that all that the Church needed to function fully as the body of Christ was supplied by him. The responsibility of the Church was not to seek the gifts *per se*, but to function in love (I Cor. 13:1 – 14:1; Eph. 4:15–16), which is the action of Christ in the Church and, as a result, in the congregation to strive for those gifts which most promote the

growth of the gathered community. Where that is done, Paul argued, outsiders or unbelievers would be confronted by none other than the presence of God in the congregation (I Cor. 14:25). This is not much different from Jesus' conclusion in John 13:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34–35).

THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER

While we may quite easily see that there was 'power' in Jesus and the Church, we must also understand that the power in evidence was not naked, purposeless, goal-less power. All the actions of Jesus were to be understood as relating to the purpose of God. Hence he told those who criticised him that if it was by the Spirit of God that he cast out demons, then the kingdom of God had come to them (Matt. 12:28).

Within the framework of the Gospel accounts, that was a most significant statement, for the beginning of the action of Jesus began with the role of John the Baptist and his cry, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'¹ (Matt. 3:2²). On the phrase 'the kingdom of heaven', Leon Morris says:

It is also accepted that we should understand *kingdom* as meaning 'rule' rather than 'realm'; that is to say, the expression is dynamic: it points us to God as

¹ The meaning of 'has come near' or 'is at hand' (Gk. ἐγγύς) can probably not be determined by lexical means. Rather we will need to see how the announcement prefigures the rest of the Gospel contents to discover what was intended.

² The phrase 'the kingdom of heaven', found only in Matthew's Gospel, is demonstrably equivalent to 'the kingdom of God' used by the other evangelists and five times by Matthew himself. What is not obvious is why Matthew should have chosen to use 'the kingdom of God' when he did.

doing something, as actively ruling, rather than to an area or a group of people over whom he is sovereign. The kingdom is something that happens rather than something that exists.¹

The reign of God was never in doubt. God is 'the King of the ages' (I Tim. 1:17), but now His reign was being revealed in a climactic way. With the birth of Jesus presented as a dramatic consummation of all the desires of the godly in Israel (Luke 1:33, 54; 2:25, 28–32, 38), the ministry of Jesus began with the declaration that it was now 'happening'. Jesus took up John's theme and made the same announcement (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14–15). From that time onwards, Jesus was occupied with the matter of the kingdom. His preaching and teaching concerned the kingdom, and Matthew says that:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan (Matt. 4:23–25).

Matthew follows this summary by given examples. First there is 'the Sermon on the Mount' (Matt. 5 – 7) where the theme of the kingdom dominates:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . .'
'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . .'

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 53. Writing from the standpoint of biblical theology, Graeme Goldsworthy says:

we may best understand this concept in terms of the relation of ruler to subjects. That is, there is a king who *rules*, a people who are *ruled*, and a sphere where this rule is *recognized* as taking place. Put another way, the Kingdom of God involves: (a) God's people, (b) in God's place, (c) under God's rule (*Gospel and Kingdom*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1981, p. 47).

‘Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (5:1–3, 10, 19–20).

This sermon is followed by a description of the way the kingdom of God is in action. The miracles of Matthew 8 – 9 are concluded with the words of 9:35–37:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’

The phrase ‘as sheep without a shepherd’ was taken from Numbers 27:17 and referred to Israel as lacking a king or leader. The instruction by Jesus to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers is followed by his giving authority to the twelve to do precisely as he was doing: casting out unclean spirits, curing diseases and sickness, raising the dead and cleansing lepers, and proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven ‘has drawn near’ (Matt. 10:1, 7, 8). Later, Jesus’ parables are presented as being concerned with the kingdom of heaven/God (Matt. 13//). The reason some did not receive the word of the kingdom is explained in 13:1–9. Understanding that, is understanding the secrets of the kingdom (v. 11), which involves the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy which said that the word would harden the unbelief of Israel. This was followed by the parables which took the form, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like . . .’

In other words, the notion of the action of the kingdom is derived directly from the text and not merely imposed upon it. *This is the way Matthew expects us to understand the power of Jesus and the disciples. God is in action and is fulfilling His purposes.*

What was the focus of the power which was seen in this action and teaching? In Matthew 16 there is the great revelation that Jesus is ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (v. 16),¹ with the explanation (rejected by Peter) that both Jesus, as Messiah, and his followers must lose their lives (vv. 21–26). He then concluded that:

‘the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom’ (16:27–28).

But what was the meaning of verse 28? What does it mean to see the Son of Man come in his kingdom? The statement is cryptic, and no doubt deliberately so, for Matthew proceeds to tell the story of Jesus being transfigured (17:1–8). ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’ (v. 5) is a strong statement, intended to draw the three disciples, and the reader, back to the fact that the one who was baptised with this divine affirmation is now seen in his true being and must be heard. Whatever his ‘true being’ may be, either ‘Son of God’ or ‘Son of Man’, the conclusion was that the three disciples must not disclose what they had seen until after ‘the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’ (Matt. 17:9). Before that, their information and their understanding would have been deficient.

It does not, therefore, seem hard to conclude that the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom is the same as the Son of Man raised from the dead. And, of course, that is how the Gospel of Matthew

¹ When seen in the light of Psalm 2 (cf. Matt. 3:17//), this is itself a ‘kingdom’ statement. In the psalm, the ‘anointed’ (v. 2, Heb. *messiah*; Gk. *Christ*) is ‘my king’ (v. 6) who is declared by God to be ‘my Son’ (v. 7).

finishes. Jesus, raised from the dead, declares that now 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [him]'. The eleven are to now go and make disciples of all nations,¹ that is, bring them to submission to Jesus. Of course, the task is not theirs alone. He will be with them always, to the close of the age because, as we stressed above, the task, and so the action, is his (Matt. 28:18–20).

The focal point of the kingdom is the resurrection of Jesus. Even apart from the amazing nature of such an event, the resurrection demonstrated the glory of the Son of Man *and* the glory of the Father (Rom. 6:4). Paul furthermore claimed that the gospel concerned God's Son who 'was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom. 1:4).

This declaration of Jesus as the Son of God with power seems to represent a climax of Psalm 2, with its implication for the nations. And so the resurrection appears in the Book of Acts as the most important element of the preaching.² Acts chapter 1 provides an interesting conjunction. For forty days before he was taken up to heaven, Jesus 'presented himself alive to [the apostles whom he had chosen] by many convincing proofs' (vv. 2–3). On these occasions Jesus spoke with the apostles about 'the kingdom of God' (v. 3), but told them not to leave Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit. In response to their question concerning whether at this time *Jesus* would restore the kingdom to Israel, a not unreasonable question in view of the discussions of the previous six weeks, Jesus merely replied that when the Spirit came they would be his

¹ cf. Psalm 2:8–9. There is a whole theme of scripture to be understood through these statements, indicating that the nations are always the concern of God and so of Christ (see Gen. 1:28; 11:1–9; 49:10; Exod. 19:5–6; Jonah; and the sections of the major and minor prophets which focus on the nations, either in general or on particular nations).

² Allowing for common contexts (that is, the same sermon, etc.) resurrection occurs as a major item 21 times in Acts.

witnesses, not only to Jerusalem and Judea, but also to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (cf. Ps. 2:8, 'and the ends of the earth [as] your possession').

When the group of disciples met to choose a replacement for Judas, they chose someone who would be a witness to the resurrection (v. 22). Matthias then joined the other eleven and the next event described is the outpouring of the Spirit. Peter's explanation of the event to the crowd at the feast was in terms of the resurrection:

But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

'He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.'

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses (Acts 2:24–32).

It was this message of the resurrection which dominated the preaching in the Acts of the Apostles, not only preaching to Jews, but also to Greeks, as in Athens where some thought that Paul was trying to add two new gods to the pantheon, namely Jesus and *Anastasis*, the Greek word for resurrection.

In order to proclaim that message of resurrection effectively, the apostles themselves needed to be filled with power, which is what Jesus both promised and gave:

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.¹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high’ (Luke 24:44–49).

We may conclude that the power in the early Church was not merely the ability to work miracles. Rather its primary reference was to the proclamation of the kingdom of God which was revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, leading to the declaration that Jesus is Lord (Acts 2:36; cf. 16:31). The power which was then evident in the conversion of many and the formation and growth of the Church, is directly attributed to the activity of ‘the Lord’. Thus:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved* [emphasis mine] (Acts 2:43–47).

The notable change from ‘God’ to ‘Lord’ in verse 47 seems to mean that it was the one whom Peter called Lord who, because of his resurrection, was now active as the saviour, and thus as the one who is now in the process of receiving his inheritance.²

¹ It is clear that it is not just the naked fact of Jesus walking out of the grave which is in mind, but the vast implications.

² See J. A. Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1963), p. 96. Not all commentators agree with this conclusion. Calvin, for example, simply says that it was God who did it. However, the point of the ambiguity is surely that, in Luke’s mind, since the resurrection, the distinction between Jesus and God is hard to define. The same title can be used for both. It has taken later theological enquiry to give Trinitarian form to this.

Additional note:

‘THY KINGDOM COME’

The puritan Thomas Watson, in his exposition of the Westminster Shorter Catechism,¹ devoted almost one third of his discussion of the Lord’s Prayer to the phrase, ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. Having established that God is King, he then proceeds to answer his own question (a common puritan device): ‘What kingdom then is meant when we say, “Thy kingdom come”?’ His reply is that:

Positively a twofold kingdom is meant. (1) The kingdom of grace, which God exercises in the consciences of his people. This is *regnum Dei mikron*. God’s lesser kingdom. When we pray, ‘Thy kingdom come,’ we pray that the kingdom of grace may be set up in our hearts and increased. (2) We pray also, that the kingdom of glory may hasten, and that we may, in God’s good time be translated into it. These two kingdoms of grace and glory, differ not specifically, but gradually; they differ not in nature, but in degree only. The kingdom of grace is nothing but the beginning of the kingdom of glory. The kingdom of grace is glory in the seed, and the kingdom of glory is grace in the flower. The kingdom of grace is glory in the daybreak, and the kingdom of glory is grace in the full meridian. The kingdom of grace is glory militant, and the kingdom of glory is grace triumphant.

¹ *A Body of Practical Divinity*, first published in 1692 and republished as *A Body of Divinity* (1958, 1965), *The Ten Commandments* (1959, 1965) and *The Lord’s Prayer* (1960, 1965) by The Banner of Truth Trust, London. The section on ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ appears in *The Lord’s Prayer*, pp. 54–150.

More than a century earlier, Calvin wrote concerning this petition:

God reigns where men, both by denial of themselves and by contempt of the world and of earthly life, pledge themselves to his righteousness in order to aspire to a heavenly life. Thus there are two parts to this Kingdom: first, that God by the power of his Spirit correct all the desires of the flesh which by squadrons war against him; second, that he shape all our thoughts in obedience to his rule.

Therefore, no others keep a lawful order in this petition but those who begin with themselves, that is, to be cleansed of all corruptions that disturb the peaceful state of God's Kingdom and sully its purity. Now, because the word of God is like a royal scepter, we are bidden here to entreat him to bring all men's minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it. This happens when he manifests the working of his word through the secret inspiration of his Spirit in order that it may stand forth in the degree of honor that it deserves. Afterward we should descend to the impious, who stubbornly and with desperate madness resist his authority. Therefore God sets up his Kingdom by humbling the whole world, but in different ways. For he tames the wantonness of some, breaks the untamable pride of others. We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth; that he spread and increase them in number; that he adorn them with gifts; that he establish a lawful order among them; on the other hand, that he cast down all enemies of pure teaching and religion; that he scatter their counsels and crush their efforts. From this it appears that zeal for daily progress is not enjoined upon us in vain, for it never goes so well with human affairs that the filthiness of vices is shaken and washed away, and full integrity flowers and grows. But its fullness is delayed to the final coming of Christ when, as Paul teaches, 'God will be all in all' (I Cor. 15:28).¹

Both of these writers stand in a long tradition, stemming from at least the time of the second century Church which produced *The Didache*, a document which taught the believers:

Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. And do not pray as

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk 3, ch. 20, pt 42, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 904.

the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his Gospel, pray thus: 'Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, as in Heaven so also upon earth; give us to-day our daily bread, and forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into trial, but deliver us from the Evil One, for thine is the power and the glory for ever.' Pray thus three times a day.¹

Despite the tragi-comedy of the approach of *The Didache*, it is plain that from earliest times the Christian Church has regarded what we call *The Lord's Prayer* (and Roman Catholics, *The Our Father*) as an essential part of Christian thinking if not of its actual forms of worship.

Both Calvin and Watson will repay careful, prayerful reading, but for the moment I want to observe that neither writer (nor most of their successors) attempts to locate the meaning of the Lord's Prayer and this petition in particular in the context of the Gospel of Matthew and the way Matthew's 'argument' is developed.² In doing so, both treat the Prayer as something *essentially* Christian, although the place it has in Matthew's Gospel is decidedly *pre-Christian*. That is to say, Jesus' audience, while described as 'disciples' (5:2),³ is an audience which as yet knows nothing of the work of the Cross and the gift of the Holy Spirit which Calvin and Watson presuppose. I would suggest that those who heard the Sermon on the Mount were

¹ Translation from the Loeb edition of *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1912, 1977), p. 321.

² Luke 11:1-4 also records the words of the prayer, in a somewhat different form, but my focus for the present is on the Gospel of Matthew.

³ The word *disciple* means 'a learner', one who has associated himself with a particular teacher, and plainly is not restricted to Christians, as John 3:25 (disciples of John the Baptist) and the puzzling Acts 19:1 (the identity of these 'disciples' is not made plain until Paul interrogates them further, when he discovers that they too are disciples of John the Baptist) make plain. Although evidently a reference to those who became believers through the testimony of the newly converted Saul, Acts 9:25 describes them as 'his [i.e. Saul's] disciples'.

Jews, no more and no less.¹ Indeed, the words of the prayer which occupy us would doubtless have reminded them of the language of:

the *Kaddish* ('Holy'), an ancient Aramaic prayer which formed the conclusion of the service in the synagogue and with which Jesus was no doubt familiar from childhood . . .

Exalted and hallowed be his great name
in the world which he created according to his will.
May he let his Kingdom rule
in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime
of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.
And to this, say: amen.²

Now, since Matthew wrote with his vision clearly on Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament hope, why should we not look first and foremost to the Old Testament and its language, before assuming a *post*-Pentecost outlook for Jesus and his first hearers?

Raymond Brown writes of 'The Pater Noster [*Our Father*] as an eschatological prayer'.³ In this he is not far removed from his Protestant contemporaries who see the answer to this prayer lying finally in the *parousia*, although Calvin, Watson and others do speak primarily of the Kingdom as coming via the Gospel. However, let us ask the question, what did Matthew have in mind when he recorded Jesus' eschatological prayer? It is all very well, with 2 000 years of hindsight, to look further forward in time (as well we must), but how does the Gospel of Matthew view the coming of the kingdom?

For a moment, let me observe that the answer to this question must, to a certain extent, be tentative. This is because when we

¹ Questions concerning 'Form Criticism', etc., are not at issue; what matters first is the way the author/redactor/final editor presented the Gospel to his readers.

² Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 98.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *New Testament Essays*, Paulist Press, New York, 1965, pp. 217–253.

attempt to discern a structure within the Gospel we will be confronted with the fact that many others have attempted the same thing and have come to differing conclusions.¹ However, Carson, Moo and Morris do provide us with a summary of the (relatively) common ground:

All these divisions of opinion do not prevent us from saying anything about Matthew's purpose. If we restrict ourselves to widely recognized themes, it is surely fair to infer that Matthew wishes to demonstrate, among other things, that (1) Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Son of Man, Immanuel, the one to whom the Old Testament points; (2) many Jews, especially Jewish leaders, sinfully failed to recognize Jesus during his ministry (and, by implication, are in great danger if they continue in that stance after the resurrection); (3) the promised eschatological kingdom has already dawned, inaugurated by the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus; (4) this messianic reign is continuing in the world, as believers, both Jews and Gentiles, submit to Jesus' authority, overcome temptation, endure persecution, wholeheartedly embrace Jesus' teaching, and thus demonstrate that they constitute the true locus of the people of God and the true witness to the world of the 'gospel of the kingdom'; and (5) this messianic reign is not only the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes but the foretaste of the consummated kingdom that will dawn when Jesus the Messiah personally returns.²

It is their third and fifth points which demand our attention. The reason why this should be so important is simply this: if it is true that Matthew intends us to understand that 'the promised eschatological kingdom has already dawned, inaugurated by the death, resurrection

¹ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1992) for example, before offering their own analysis of the 'dominant theories' (pp. 61–63) and then their own 'seven part outline' (pp. 63–65), begin with the observation:

That Matthew was a skilled literary craftsman no one denies. Disagreements over the structure of this gospel arise because there are so many overlapping and competing structural pointers that it appears impossible to establish a consensus on their relative importance (p. 61).

² Carson, et al., *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 81.

and exaltation of Jesus'¹ (although, conspicuously, Matthew does *not* describe the ascension of Jesus), then it will mean that we are actually living now in the answer to the Lord's Prayer, however much that answer may not yet be seen in its fullness.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

When we examine the Gospel of Matthew, we are confronted on fifteen occasions with the comment that what was being described was nothing less than the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures.² Alongside these references to the scriptures being fulfilled, are such comments as Matthew 15:7, 'You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said . . .' Furthermore, when Luke gives a genealogy for Jesus, he links Jesus with Adam (Luke 3:23–38), whereas Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy beginning with Abraham (Matt. 1:2). The significance of this is seen when John the Baptist warned the Pharisees and S

¹ It is interesting that Leon Morris elsewhere acknowledges 'the importance of the kingdom for Matthew' (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 8), while later, when dealing with Matt. 6:10, 'Thy kingdom come', failing to mention that the death and resurrection of Jesus may be an eschatological focus, and merely assuming that 'the petition looks to the coming of the time when all evil will be done away and people will gladly submit to the divine Sovereign (cf. Rev. 11:15)' (p. 145). Similarly, Carson says of the whole prayer, 'The *Christian's* primary concerns therefore are that God's name be hallowed, that his kingdom come, that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (*The Sermon on the Mount, An Evangelical of Matthew 5–7 Exposition*, [sic] Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1978, p. 61). On this petition he says:

To pray, 'Your kingdom come,' is to pray that God's saving reign will be expanded even now, and, much more, that God will usher in the consummated kingdom. When God's kingdom fully comes, it will do so because it is inaugurated by Jesus' return (p. 65).

² Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:18; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9, 35.

adducees against presuming on their Abrahamic ancestry in the face of the coming of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 3:9). It is Jesus, the descendant of Abraham, by whom the kingdom comes.

Matthew 1:1 tells us that what follows (either the list of Matt. 1:2–17 or the whole of the Gospel) is 'an account of the genealogy¹ of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' and N. Hillyer comments:

The opening words of Matt. 1, 'The book of the genealogy (*biblos geneseo's*) of Jesus Christ', are usually interpreted as the title to the genealogical table which follows in vv. 2–16, but something more may be implied. On the only two occasions in the LXX where the phrase *biblos geneleos* appears (Gen. 2:4, 5:1), it does not merely introduce a genealogy, but also mentions the process of the creation of the universe or of man. It is therefore possible that the use of this phrase at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel deliberately suggests that the advent of Jesus inaugurates a 'new creation', or at least a new era for humanity and the world (D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1972, 74 f.).

Abraham and David are singled out as pivotal points in the genealogical development of the ancestry of Jesus. The two names are in the mainstream of Jewish messianism in both intertestamental and rabbinic literature, as well as of Christian messianism. Son of David emphasizes the royal messiahship (Pss. Sol. 17:21), while son of Abraham, which is also a messianic title (Test. Lev. 8:15), stresses Jesus' origin within the Jewish nation and faith: he is the true seed of Abraham in whom the promises of God are fulfilled. Luke takes the ancestry of Jesus back to Adam, thus pointing to his descent from the universal father of mankind; Matthew goes back no further than to the father of the Israelites (Hill, op. cit., 75).²

Leon Morris has observed, concerning the phrase *biblos geneleos*, that in Genesis 5:1 ' . . . the emphasis . . . is on Adam who

¹ Or, *birth* (NRSV margin); compare Matthew 1:18, where the same word is translated as 'birth'.

² N. Hillyer, 'Son', in Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3: Pri–Z, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1978, p. 656.

began the line, but in Matthew it is on Jesus in whom the line reached its consummation.¹ Given this, we may conclude that Matthew's language is intended to drive home the point that mention of Abraham is intended to indicate far more than mere ancestry; it is meant to remind the reader that all that God intended in the call of Abraham finds its fulfilment in Jesus.

Perhaps the observation, that Jesus' return from Egypt fulfilled 'what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son"' (Matt. 2:15), points us in the same direction. Quite clearly, the exodus from Egypt is described as God's redemption of His firstborn son from slavery (Exod. 4:22–23). The prophet Hosea had explained that the judgment of Israel (the northern kingdom) was due to its ingratitude in the face of God's redemptive love:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them (Hosea 11:1–4).

The use of Hosea 11:1, although perhaps superficially strange, actually indicates that Jesus was all that Israel was, yet refused to be. He was Israel, the true descendent of Abraham!

Abraham, on the other hand, is the one called by God with a view to the restoration of creation. He appears following Genesis

¹ Morris, *Matthew*, p. 19, n. 3. He has also suggested in the text of the work that Matthew's use of the word *genesis* in 1:1 may be a deliberate reflection on the Greek title of the first book of the Bible, implying that Matthew 'would write about the new genesis, the new creation in Jesus Christ' (p. 19).

chapters 1 to 11, in which 'we see God as the Lord of creation and the disperser of the nations'.¹ The language of his call is significant:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen. 12:1–3).

The significance can be seen in the use of the words 'nation' and 'family'. Following the Flood and the associated salvation of Noah and his sons, which is presented strongly in terms of the re-establishment of creation,² Genesis describes the descendants of Noah's sons (10:1ff.). One example will suffice: in Genesis 10:5 we read:

From these the coastland peoples spread. These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their *families*, in their *nations*.³

The same words occur again in 10:18 ('family' only), 10:20, 31 and 32. The post-flood world is comprised of 'families' and 'nations' which, acting in rebellious agreement, determine to 'make a name f

¹ Donald Robinson, *Faith's Framework: The Structure of New Testament Theology*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1997, p. 75.

² cf. Gen. 1:28, 'God blessed them [i.e., male and female] and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply . . ."'; and 9:1, 'God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply . . ."'

³ 'Family' is Heb. *עִמּוּךְ פְּדָה* (*mishpachah*) and 'nation' is Heb. *גּוֹי* (*goy*). Compare R. E. Clements ('*goy*', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren [eds], *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, John T. Willis [trans], Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 428), who says that the use of these two words in the same context indicates a 'general field of semantic reference, without implying complete synonymity'. E. A. Speiser (*Genesis*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York, 1983, p. 86) says of *mishpachah* that while it 'is generally translated as "family", [its] basic meaning, however, is demonstrably "category, class, subdivision." The accent here is on political communities . . .'

or [them]selves; otherwise [they will] be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 11:4). They were subsequently scattered and their unity destroyed (11:7–9). Now the call of Abraham is in terms already well established. God will make of Abraham 'a great nation' and will make his name great (which the nations of themselves could not do), with the result that through him 'all the families' of the earth would be blessed, which would carry the idea of the restoration of the creational 'blessing'.¹

Donald Robinson² says, concerning the blessing of the families of the earth:

... our present purpose is to discover the *origin* of the symbol or metaphor which Jesus uses. Here we are directed to the salvation history of the Old Testament and to the kingdom as experienced by God's people in the Old Testament. In a word, it is this: God's power and dominion, seen and known in creation, is also exercised on behalf of the people whom he chooses, first by delivering them from their oppressors, then by ruling over them in the place he has assigned to them—with a view to blessing not only them, but the whole world through them.

There are two distinct phases of this experience as recorded in the Old Testament. The first phase may be called *a historical experience* of God's 'rule' in the blessing of Jacob and his sons, the exodus from Egypt, the possession of the land of Canaan, and the establishment of the kingdom of David and Solomon with all the benefits of security, plenty and peace. The second phase may be called *the prophetic reflection* on God's rule, when the kingdom of David was no more, the nation divided and scattered, and the symbols of God's presence and blessing—the land, Jerusalem, and the Temple—either ruined or possessed ambiguously to only a very small degree by a segment of the people or a few survivors.

Yet to this second period belong the great prophecies of the establishment or re-establishment of God's kingdom in the land and over all nations:

another exodus, another possession of Canaan, another Jerusalem and Temple, the reappearance of David the king to reign in righteousness, a new covenant. Looked at in this way, the experience which Israel had of God's kingdom as presented in the Old Testament is, in both its phases, closely associated with the promise and covenant made with Abraham. Indeed, it can be said that the experience of God's kingdom—whether in the period from the historical exodus to the great days of David and Solomon, or in the period of prophetic hope—was nothing other than the experience of what it meant for the Lord to be Israel's God and for Israel to be the Lord's people. This was the core of the promise to Abraham.

From this perspective, we can see that the emphasis in Matthew's Gospel on fulfilment of the scriptures and the conspicuous identification with Abraham leaves us in little doubt that the use of the phrase 'the kingdom of heaven'¹ is meant to drive the reader to the great hope of Israel, and so of the nations, which the Old Testament has established.

JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

Having already established the nature of the 'kingdom' in the Gospels and Acts, I do not need to repeat that material. However, there are some elements which I have not discussed which add weight to my contention.

Significant is Matthew's opening assertion that he is writing an account of the genealogy of 'Jesus the Messiah' (1:1, *NRSV*). 'Messiah' (Gk, *Christos*) is the Hebrew word usually translated as 'anointed one'. While later the word 'Christ' does occur as something of a name (while always, for the New Testament's Jewish writers, retaining its original meaning), within Matthew's Gospel that is hardly so. By looking at Jesus' baptism, we can see that to

¹ See note 37, above.

² Robinson, *Faith's Framework*, pp. 74f. See also the very accessible discussion in Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1981), especially chapter 5, 'The Covenant and the Kingdom of God'.

¹ See p. 14, footnote 15.

be called 'Christ' meant that Jesus was none other than the Son of God who was thus God's 'king':

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:16–17).

The words of God to Jesus are taken from Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. The context of Psalm 2 indicates that the one addressed as 'Son' is the 'anointed' who stands with the Lord against all the rebellious kings of the earth (Ps. 2:1–2). Undaunted by their opposition, God identifies the Son as 'my king on Zion, my holy hill' (Ps. 2:6) and proceeds to offer him 'the nations [as his] heritage and the ends of the earth [as his] possession' (Ps. 2:8). The nations are his for the asking. The responsibility of the nations is, therefore, to submit to the one who has been given this authority (Ps. 2:10–11).

Isaiah 42:1ff. also has as its focus the 'Servant' who has the 'nations' as the scope of his labours (Isa. 42:1–4, 6). Now, while there has been discussion concerning the identity of the servant of Isaiah, it does seem plain that Isaiah has first identified Israel (Jacob) as God's servant (see Isa. 41:8–9). But the principle which I espoused above, that Jesus was all that Israel was, yet refused to be, applies here. To be given the responsibility of the servant is an indication again that Jesus is Israel.

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 powerfully shows that the servant (Isa. 52:13) will suffer and that the nations will be startled when they are confronted by the depths of his agony (Isa. 52:14–15). This agony will be redemptive, in spite of the failure to believe (Isa. 53:1):

...the true understanding of the Servant is dumbfounding; here it is communicated by divine revelation, a *message...revealed*. Without such revelation, who could believe that this one, with his birth and early life, his

unimpressive appearance, was the arm of the Lord? Does it not rather stand to reason that he was despised?¹

While earlier, Isaiah's 'servant' was Israel, here we see that the 'servant' now stands as a lone figure, 'despised and rejected by men' (Isa. 53:3) as he endures being 'stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted' (Isa. 53:4). Yet, in all this, he will see his offspring, the beneficiaries of his terrible anguish (Isa. 53:10) and these 'children of the barren woman . . . will possess the nations' (Isa. 54:1, 3). The suffering was the triumph.

Plainly, the sufferings of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and then on the Cross carry this Isaianic significance, although the precise wording is not used. Instead, Matthew wrote:

Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered . . . But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled."' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled (Matt. 26:31, 56).

Just as he was the Messiah, with its implication of kingship, so the wise men came looking for 'the king of the Jews' when he was born (Matt. 2:2), and so it was as 'king of the Jews' that he died (Matt. 27:27–37, 42–43).

This was his triumph. Having been raised from the dead he announced that:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18–20).

¹ A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1993, pp. 426f.

Now he is King, and as King he commands his 'offspring' to possess the nations on his behalf. As far as the Gospel of Matthew is concerned, the climax of all of Israel's history has come. *In the death and resurrection of Jesus the kingdom has come!* The prayer of expectant, believing Israel has been answered.

The fifth point of Carson, Moo and Morris¹ now appears: whatever trials the disciples may face as they preach 'the gospel of the kingdom' (Matt. 24:14), they do so in the certain knowledge that the Son of Man will come in his glory and, as King, separate out his inheritance, namely, those nations² who are to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:31–34).

Yet the Gospel does not conclude with the disciples going out into the hostile world, however much we may have been prepared for that. It concludes with the declaration of triumph: 'All authority . . . has been given to me . . . I am with you always, to the end of the age'. The petitioner who *only* looks to the parousia, but who does not see and, indeed, function in the presence of the kingdom, is all the poorer for it.

— 2 —

We have seen that, in both the ministry of Jesus before his death and resurrection and in the life of the Church, power was an observable phenomenon. But what is often not realised is the existence of healing and magic in the ancient Greek and Roman world. While the modern western mind may be amazed at the report of a healing taking place, in the ancient world such reports were common. That did not mean they were taken for granted in any way, as the records of the responses of the crowds to Jesus and his disciples and to the apostles later clearly show. But we must note that healing and magic were accepted as *part* of religious life, depending, of course, on which god was being worshipped. The following account gives an indication:

Some of the cures are reported as miracles of the most astounding kind.

Cure effected by Apollo and Asclepius. Ambrosia of Athens, blind in one eye. She came with supplications to the god, and as she walked round the temple she smiled at the accounts of some of the cures which she found incredible and impossible, accounts which related how the lame and the blind had been cured by a vision which came to them in a dream. She fell asleep and had a vision. The god appeared before her, telling her that she would be cured and that she had to dedicate in the sanctuary a pig made of silver as a token of her ignorance. Having said this he cut out the bad eye and immersed it in a medicine. She awoke at dawn, cured.

A man with an ulcer in his stomach. While he slept he had a dream. The god appeared to him and ordered his assistants to hold him so that the god could cut out the affected part. The man tried to escape but he was seized and fastened to a door. Asclepius then opened up his stomach, cut out the ulcer, sewed him up again and finally released him. The man awoke cured, but the floor of the *abaton* was covered with blood.

Several reports mention the licking of the diseased spot by a snake or a dog. Some cures can be accounted for on psychological grounds or from the

¹ See p. 25 above.

² *NRSV*, 'he will separate *people* from one another' to my mind adds an element not intended by Matthew. Compare *RSV*, 'Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate *them* from one another'.

medical practice of the time. In the early period the priests employed surgery, drugs, and hypnosis; later, they effected cures by courses of treatment, including beneficent prescriptions like diet, exercise, baths, and medicines. In some cases the treatment prescribed was contrary to all ancient medical theory.¹

While these healings were different to those performed by Jesus, others were reported as being very similar. Apollonius of Tyana, a contemporary of Jesus, was described in terms very similar to him:

The most significant Neopythagorean for New Testament studies has been Apollonius of Tyana (in Cappadocia), whose life spanned the first century A.D., and who died in the principate of Nerva. As presented by his biographer Philostratus, he was an ascetic wandering teacher and reformer who visited many of the prominent cities of the Roman world and traveled as far as India. He was known as a wise man and wonder-worker. As with other philosophers, he was persecuted under Nero and Domitian, but charges of magical practices were also involved. His reported miraculous powers and his life-style have made him the principal first-century representative of the 'divine man' (*theios aner*) concept—both of the sage and wonder-worker types—which has come to prominence in Gospel studies as the background for the portrayal of Jesus.

Rival traditions about Apollonius were circulated in the ancient world, but the only full account to be preserved is the *Life of Apollonius* by Flavius Philostratus (c. A.D. 170–249). Behind Philostratus are two older views of Apollonius—as a magician and charlatan or a wonder-worker and theosoph. A principal thrust of Philostratus' work is to defend Apollonius from charges of magic and to attribute his miracles to supernatural power (cf. the charge that Jesus was a magician . . .). He wrote the *Life* at the instigation of Julia Domna, wife of the emperor Septimius Severus, whose family was interested in religious teachers and philosophers. Alexander Severus kept statues (in place of Roman gods) of Alexander, Orpheus, Apollonius, Abraham, and Christ. Later Hierocles, a provincial governor, used the *Life* to parallel Apollonius with Christ as a polemic against Christianity in a work that called forth a reply by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century. Some of the apparent parallels between Philostratus' picture of

Apollonius and Christ may be due to syncretistic tendencies already present in Severan circles.

Philostratus' Apollonius describes his practices as follows:

My own system of wisdom is that of Pythagoras who taught me to worship the gods in the way you see . . . and to dress myself . . . in linen. And the very fashion of letting my hair grow long, I have learned from Pythagoras as part of his discipline, and also it is a result of his wisdom that I keep myself pure from animal food. I cannot therefore become either for you or for anybody else a companion in drinking [wine] or an associate in idleness and luxury. (*Vita* 1.32)

Apollonius also rejected marriage for himself. He condemned animal sacrifice, substituting prayer and meditation. His closeness to the gods supposedly gave him a knowledge of the past and the future. He renounced monetary advantage and recommended to others a kind of communism. Despite his professed adherence to Pythagoras, there are Stoic, Cynic, and Platonic elements in Apollonius.

Among the features of Apollonius' life that may be paralleled with Jesus are: his miraculous birth (1.4, 5); the gathering of a circle of disciples, of whom one (Damis) was in a position to transmit authentic information; itinerant teaching; collection of miracle stories (demoniacal boy, lame man, blind man, paralytic; 3.38ff.); and disappearance at his trial (8.5).

As a travel romance of a saint and a wonder-worker and as a collection of lore from many places the *Life of Apollonius* is of a piece with the Christian apocryphal Acts.¹

Although these references are lengthy, they do show us that the mere performance of healings and other 'magical' (?) acts are not enough to demand that people should be particularly drawn to the Christian gospel. In fact, the Christian gospel continued to appear as a *superstition* to learned Romans.² That did not mean that they were sceptical about miraculous healings and so on. Quite the contrary; they were people whom we would regard as credulous, believing in omens and prophecies and signs, often in an extravagant way. Their

¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, p. 211.

¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, p. 361ff.

² See Tacitus, *Annals*, XV; and Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 'Nero', XV, i, 2.

definition of superstition included any beliefs and practices strange to the Romans, and in particular to their gods.

So we must conclude that the power which Paul speaks of in Romans 1:16 has little to do with healings and so on. There is the claim that they took place among the Christians, but that did not make the Christians any different from many other religious groups. The importance of this fact should surely not be overlooked in the Church of today.

What we observed in the first chapter was that healings and so on were to be understood in a far broader context, namely, that of the kingdom of God. That context brought us to the resurrection of Jesus and its moral implications, those of the lordship of Christ and his intention that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Luke 24:47).

THE GOSPEL AND THE POWER OF GOD

Paul described his 'call' in Acts 26:15–18:

I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

There can be no doubt that this account of the purpose of God for Paul indicates that some great effects were to be expected from Paul's activities and, what is more, from the place of this account in the Book of Acts, that these results are precisely what have been described.

Likewise, when Luke first recounts Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, he does so in terms of Paul's being chosen by the Lord to bring the Lord's 'name¹ before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel' (Acts 9:15). The Lord would, furthermore, 'show him how much he must suffer for the sake of [his] name' (Acts 9:16). Immediately we read of Ananias going in to Paul² and declaring that 'the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the way here, has sent me to you so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 9:17). In the second account of his conversion, Paul is told:

'Brother Saul, regain your sight!' In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he [Ananias] said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name' (Acts 22:13–16).

To understand the powerful ministry of Paul, then, we must observe that the nature of his ministry, which is given in retrospect in chapter 26, is conditioned by a number of factors. These include: (i) a personal revelation by Jesus the Lord to Paul prior to and resulting in Paul's conversion; (ii) the regaining of Paul's sight (which, though not mentioned in chapter 26 is probably being alluded to in the reference to the opening of the eyes of the Gentiles); (iii) the gift of the Holy Spirit (while obviously 'the indispensable qualification for the prophetic and apostolic service mapped out'³ for him, was this also an indication that he was participating in the power and program which the other apostles knew at Pentecost?).

¹ See p. 20, n. 21. It is plain that in these passages the name 'the Lord' is quite specifically identified with Jesus; see Acts 9:5, 17 ('the Lord Jesus'), 22:8; 26:15.

² For convenience I will continue to call him by his Roman name.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New London Commentary on the New Testament, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1954, p. 201.

Acts 9:22 uses the Greek word ἐξεδυναμώσατο (*enedunamouto*) from the same root as δυναμις, and basically meaning to make strong or able. The *RSV*, following verse 19, has verse 22 read, 'But Saul increased all the more in strength', referring to his physical strength; but *NRSV*¹ has 'Saul became increasingly more powerful' and this seems the more likely since this is linked with his 'confound[ing] the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah'. Thus the gift of the Holy Spirit for Paul evidently results in the same powerful proclamation as that seen in the other apostles; (iv) baptism and the forgiveness of sins; and (v) suffering for the sake of Jesus' (the Lord's) name.

From these factors we may perhaps draw up a profile of Paul the preacher: he was a man whose initial hostility to Christians and, so, to Christ was dissolved by his being actually confronted by the risen Jesus himself. Indeed, far from being simply 'dissolved', the hostility was actually changed into a passionate devotion as Paul was baptised, so knowing the forgiveness of sins and receiving the Holy Spirit. From elsewhere (for example, Acts 14:22; Phil. 3:10) we can discern that far from regarding suffering for the sake of Christ as a problem, Paul actually embraced it, as did the other members of the early church (see Acts 5:41).²

¹ Also, *NIV* has 'Yet Saul grew more and more powerful'. See also, Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on The Acts of the Apostles*, (United Bible Societies, London, 1972) p. 194. On the question of how a person could 'increase in power', Lenski writes that 'power was bestowed upon him, and this in increasing measure as his work went on' (R. C. H. Lenski, *An Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1964, p. 370).

² Luke records Jesus himself as saying that it was 'necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (Luke 24:26). The necessity was occasioned by the Scriptures having spoken of him (v. 27), but, nonetheless, the suffering of Jesus is seen, not merely as an unavoidable obstacle, but as an indispensable element in the plan of God (see also Acts 2:23; Rev. 13:10; etc.). The suffering of believers is intrinsic to their being 'in him' (see II Cor. 4:10).

All of this leads to the conclusion that Paul's ministry is presented as being totally at one with that of the other apostles. Their credentials began with their having been eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21; 2:32) and included their receiving the Holy Spirit and their proclamation of forgiveness (Acts 2:38). Both Paul and the others shared the fundamental element that what they did was essentially a witness. Peter and John, for example, could 'not keep from speaking about what [they] had seen and heard' (Acts 4:20), and Paul is addressed in exactly the same terms in Acts 22:15—'for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard'.¹ In Acts 26:16 the stress is again on Paul as a witness to what he has seen and, indeed, to what he will see:

But get up and stand on your feet; for I [Jesus] have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

His past experience of Christ will be, and I assume that the language demands that we add, *and must be*, a continuing one. When he speaks it will be out of the present experience of the risen Christ and not simply a recollection of some past event.

¹ With the curious exception of the tenses of the verbs, Acts 4:20 uses the aorist tense for both 'seen' and 'heard', as if primarily referring to the great 'event' of the resurrection, whereas Acts 22:15 uses the perfect tense for 'what you have seen' and the aorist for 'heard'. The implication of this may be that the revelation continues, but since there is evidence that Jesus continues to speak, albeit through the Spirit (Acts 16:6-7), then it is the use of the aorist which is hard to understand. One suggestion concerning the use of the perfect tense for 'seen' is that it 'marks what was essential in giving him enduring consecration as an Apostle' (R. J. Knowling, 'The Acts of the Apostles' in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 459); see also Lenski (*Acts*, p. 909), though neither really addresses the question of the aorist tense. Lenski only says that 'his hearing the voice of Jesus was only an adjunct' to his having seen him.

At this point, Paul's own account of his call should be noted:¹

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus (Gal. 1:11–17).

The unique nature of the revelation is stressed, no doubt because Paul's apostleship was being called into question by some, especially in the light of the different stance he was taking on the matter of the Law. His gospel is the result of a revelation of Jesus Christ coming to him (v. 16f., '... was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that [Gk. $\epsilon\{\nu\alpha\}$] I might proclaim him'), but he adds the extra element of the choice being made before he was born. This addition has drawn attention to the possibility that Paul actually was deliberately describing his ministry in terms of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord (Isa. 49:1, 5) and of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5). O'Brien says that:

Although there is some difference of opinion, we agree that Paul echoes the language of Jeremiah in Galatians 1:15–16, since the prophet's experiences are akin to Paul's 'apostolic self-consciousness'. Jeremiah knew that his call from Yahweh had been a true experience and that his message was God's sure word to Israel. But how could he prove that he was a true prophet who stood in the council of the Lord and had heard his word (Jer 23:18–22) when the false prophets had not? The validity of Jeremiah's commission was bound up with the truthfulness of the Lord's message. Similarly, the validity of Paul's

¹ A fuller discussion of these topics is found in P. T. O'Brien, *Consumed By Passion: Paul and the Dynamic of the Gospel* (Lancer, Homebush West, 1993). The book represents the Moore College Lectures of 1992.

commission was also questioned. Attempts were made to undermine his apostolic standing in the eyes of his converts. In the final analysis Paul's commission and the gospel he preached were inextricably linked. To denigrate one was to despise the other. Paul, like Jeremiah, had 'stood in the council of the Lord', that is, he had received both his gospel and his commission to preach it from the risen and exalted Lord Jesus.¹

If the link with Jeremiah is at all valid, then I would suggest that not only the call of Jeremiah is being alluded to, but also the nature of his message. God said to Jeremiah:

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Jer. 1:9–10).

When Jeremiah found the task of his ministry too burdensome, and longed to stop, he was forced to admit that the word which had come to him was not apart from him, but had become part of the fabric of his own being. He said:

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (Jer. 20:7–9).

Paul was likewise gripped by the obligation to preach which, I suggest from the summary above, had nothing to do with any sense of 'legal' imposition. Hence:

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting! If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to

¹ O'Brien, *Consumed By Passion*, p. 6.

me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel (I Cor. 9:15–18).

Three statements by Paul fill out this picture:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum *I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ* (Rom. 15:18–19).

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known* (Col. 1:24–25).

But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through *me the message might be fully proclaimed* and all the Gentiles might hear it [emphasis mine] (II Tim. 4:17).

The words in italics are significant. Literal translations show that, to the Romans, Paul said that he had 'fulfilled the gospel' (πεπληρωκεαναι το; ευαγγελιον); to the Colossians that his commission was 'to fulfil the word of God' (πληρωσαι το;ν λογον του θεου); and to Timothy that he was strengthened 'so that the proclamation might be fulfilled' (το; κηρυγμα πληροφορηθη').¹ This means that there is an inner dynamic in the word which had come to him that would not cease until the word of God had accomplished all that God has purposed and succeeded in the thing for which He sent it (Isa. 55:11).

¹ The verb in Romans and Colossians is πληρωω, while that in II Timothy is πληροφορεω, but there is no significant difference between them.

So, whether as 'gospel', 'word' or 'proclamation', that which Paul preached had its own power, and did not depend on his own ability in any way for its success. Indeed, quite the opposite was true. Paul rejected the possibility that he should use techniques to bring about a response, for if he had done so, the faith of the hearers would 'rest . . . on human wisdom [and not] on the power of God' (I Cor. 2:5). He refused to use the techniques of rhetoric¹ 'lest the cross of Christ be emptied' (I Cor. 1:17).² The cross of Christ, as the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, is full of the purpose of God and, as such, must accomplish that purpose.

Paul summarised this issue in II Corinthians 4:1–6:

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

¹ I recently heard the comment (source withheld) that just as Paul rejected the use of rhetorical methods, so the church today teaches a 'kiddie' form of it to its ministry candidates in the name of preaching methods and it teaches a form of the equally rejected sophistry to those who would be successful pastors. However much that may be an overstatement, and it may well be doubted that it is at all, we ought very carefully to examine the degree to which we expect the proclamation to work its own success as against our suspicion that our own abilities are a contributing factor. Listen, for example, to the advertising which presents the attributes of the preachers as the primary focus and as the reason why we should attend the particular occasion.

² The words, 'of its power' which appear in many translations (*RSV, NIV, NRSV*, etc.) are not in the Greek; cf. *NASB*, 'that the cross of Christ should not be made void'.

The power of the gospel, then, lies in the fact that the word which created is the word which came to Paul and which, through him, effects the response. But for him to modify the word or to intrude any method calculated to assist the word is to deny the whole work that God is about. Like Jesus, Paul did not regard rejection as failure; if the gospel is veiled, then he understands why and he understands how that is remedied. For Jesus, when whole towns rejected him, it was simply:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Matt. 11:25–26).

Thus Paul, when evaluating the disobedience of Israel to the word of God (Rom. 10:18–21), precedes it with the principle:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:14–17).

Verse 14 sets the stage: the content of the message is Christ—‘How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?’ But verse 17 explains the result: the preacher of the message is Christ himself—‘what is heard comes through the word¹ of Christ’. The power of the gospel lies in the person of Jesus. It is he who is the preacher. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him and it is he who is with us always to the close of the age (Matt. 28:18, 20).

¹ The Greek word is *ῥημά* (*rhema*, ‘utterance’, ‘word’, etc.), but there is no substantial difference from *λόγος* (*logos*, ‘word’).

That is why the story of the growth of the Church in Acts so strongly insists that it is ‘the word’ which grew mightily and prevailed (19:20), that it was ‘the word’ which was to occupy the apostles’ time and energies (6:2). In fact, the apostles recognised that they were servants of the word (6:4, ‘we will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word’). They were men who stood in the council of the Lord and who must not be distracted. To be distracted would be to ignore the immense significance of the gospel, the word, the proclamation, namely that it is the vehicle by which the risen Jesus himself speaks to the world.

... He does do it. And because He does, as the New Testament tells us, the message concerning Him is the Gospel, glad tidings, and as such it comes to the men of all times and places with the claim and promise of being the proclamation of truth which binds and looses. He is risen, and reveals Himself. He Himself, Jesus Christ, declares His majesty. He declares Himself to be the royal man. He declares Himself in that distinctive sovereignty as a human person. He declares Himself in that divine proximity of His attitudes and decisions. He declares Himself as the Herald and Bearer, the actualisation, of the kingdom of God on earth. And supremely, and in confirmation of everything else, He declares Himself as the One who in His death fulfilled in human form the gracious self-humiliation of God, interceding in His death for us who had fallen victim to death, and, as distinct from all human enterprises, interceding in the name and authority and power of God. This exalted One is the One who is concealed in the lowliness of His death. He is, in fact, exalted in this concealment. And as He bursts open from within the closed door of His concealment, of His death, He reveals Himself as this exalted One. No one has found or discovered Him as such. No one has brought Him out of His concealment. It is He Himself who has shown and revealed and made Himself known as such. And in so doing He has been seen and understood and known as such, as the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world.¹

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt 2, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 299.

— 3 —

Our study so far has brought us to see that when Paul says that the gospel is the *power* of God to salvation, he obviously means something quite specific. Things such as ‘signs and wonders’, while plainly part of the life of the apostolic church and, indeed, a significant feature of the *apostolic* ministry (see Rom. 15:18–19; II Cor. 12:12), were by no means the ‘power’ to which Paul was referring.¹

What, then, is the power? While the answer is ‘the gospel’, we must ask what we mean by that phrase. For example, is it enough to define the gospel as ‘the good news about Jesus’? I would go so far as to respond that that definition, of itself, may actually hide the nature of the gospel, so that the preachers could even be unaware, to a certain extent, of what it is they are doing.

The Greek word which we translate as ‘gospel’ is εὐαγγελιον (*euaggelion*) and ‘to preach the gospel’ is εὐαγγελισμα (εὐαγγελισμα) (*euaggelizomai*). Our familiarity with the phrase ‘good news’ should not hinder us from asking whether that is how the words were used in the New Testament. And further, we should ask whether or not the

¹ cf. G. H. Twelftree, ‘Signs, Wonders, Miracles’ in G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, Downers Grove, 1993), pp. 875–7:

In light of the strong association between ‘signs and wonders’ and the miracle stories of the Exodus tradition, the ‘signs and wonders’ performed by Paul to win the Gentiles (Rom 15:19) cannot refer only to Paul’s sufferings, nor can they be of merely secondary importance to him (as Käsemann maintains). Rather, as reluctant as Paul was to draw attention to his miracles in the way his opponents did (1 Cor 1:22; 2 Cor 12:12), ‘signs and wonders’ were the miracles he performed empowered by the Spirit and integrally associated with his preaching to form part of the new Exodus to the freedom possible in the age of Christ. Thus the gospel is, in part, the miracles that were performed (cf. Rom 15:18–19; 1 Thess 1:5).

New Testament usage reflects the way the words were used in the ancient world. Donald Robinson¹ observes concerning *euaggelion* that:

The word has a long history in Greek literature, going back to Homer, but there is something quite fresh and distinctive about its use by Paul and the evangelists. In the Greek of the time, the plural form *euaggelia* was used to describe the sacrifices and celebrations conducted in response to certain official announcements. It was also used, generally in the plural, for the announcements themselves.

Gerhard Friedrich, in his article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, indicates two contemporary contexts in which *euaggelion* occurs — indeed the two uses to which the word is practically confined. The first is as a technical term in connection with victory in battle. To cite Friedrich’s description of this first context:

εὐαγγελιον is a technical term for ‘news of victory’. The messenger appears, raises his right hand in greeting and calls out with a loud voice: χαίρε . . . νικῶμεν [‘Rejoice . . . we are victorious’]. By his appearance it is known already that he brings good news. His face shines, his spear is decked with laurel, his head is crowned, he swings a branch of palms, joy fills the city, εὐαγγελια are offered, the temples are garlanded, an *agon*² is held, crowns are put on for the sacrifices and the one to whom the message is owed is honoured with a wreath. Political and private reports can also be εὐαγγελια For them, too, sacrificial feasts are held. But εὐαγγελιον is closely linked with the thought of victory in battle.³

The second context in which *euaggelion* appears as a technical term is in connection with the imperial cult. The emperor unites in his own person the concepts of ‘the divine man’, ‘good fortune’ and ‘salvation’:

This is what gives *euaggelion* its significance and power. The ruler is divine by nature. His power extends to men, to animals, to the earth and to the sea. Nature belongs to him; wind and waves are subject to him. He works miracles

¹ Donald Robinson, *Faith’s Framework*, pp. 50ff.

² An *agon* was a festival at which contestants contended for a prize. The most lasting example is the Olympic Games, although there were many such festivals.

³ Gerhard Friedrich, ‘εὐαγγελιον’, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Kittel, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 722.

and heals men.¹ He is the saviour of the world who also redeems individuals from their difficulties. . . . He has appeared on earth as a deity in human form. He is the protective god of the state. His appearance is the cause of good fortune to the whole kingdom. Extraordinary signs accompany the course of his life. They proclaim the birth of the ruler of the world. A comet appears at his accession, and at his death signs in heaven declare his assumption into the ranks of the gods. Because the emperor is more than a common man, his ordinances are glad messages and his commands are sacred writings. What he says is a divine act and implies good and salvation for men. He proclaims *euaggelia* through his appearance, and these *euaggelia* treat of him. The first evangelium is the news of his birth. . . . Other *euaggelia* follow, e.g. the news of his coming of age, and especially his accession. . . . Joy and rejoicing come with the news. Humanity, sighing under a heavy burden of guilt, wistfully longs for peace. . . . Then suddenly there rings out the news that the *soter* is born, that he has mounted the throne, that a new era dawns for the whole world. This *euaggelion* is celebrated with offerings and yearly festivals. All cherished hopes are exceeded. The world has taken on a new appearance.²

Here, then, is the way the word was used in the world in which Paul wrote. Had the early Christians looked for the word in a dictionary, this is the way it would have been expressed. Yet they would have observed that there were some differences. The first is that, while the contemporary use was the plural, in the New Testament there is only one gospel and it is ‘always, either directly or by implication. . . . the *euaggelion* of God. No secular reference is even alluded to.’³ In other words, in the face of many human *euaggelia*, the New Testament proclaims one *euaggelion* and, what is more, that *euaggelion* proclaims judgment and demands repentance.⁴ This is illustrated by the use of *euaggelion* in Revelation 14:6–7:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language

and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’.

To those suffering the attacks of the beast from the sea (the Roman governor?) and the beast from the land (the priest of the imperial cult?) with their imperial *euaggelia*, the angel brings an eternal *euaggelion*. *Eternal* may be the chosen adjective to demonstrate that the gospel originates not from earth but from heaven, not from Caesar but from God.¹ And the content of the eternal gospel is clear: ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’.

The translation of *euaggelion* as ‘good news’ does have an apparent background in the Old Testament where the LXX uses the noun *euaggelia* (plural, in II Sam. 4:10 below) as the reward for good news, and then for the good news itself (II Sam. 18:20, 22, 25; II Kings 7:9), while the verb *euaggelizomai* is used in the sense of bringing good news. Thus I Samuel 31:9:

They cut off [Saul’s] head, stripped off his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the houses of their idols and to the people.

In II Samuel 4:10 there is the interesting combination of verb and noun:

‘when the one who told me, “See, Saul is dead,” thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag—this was the reward I gave him for his news’.

The messenger ‘thought he was bringing good news’ (και; αυστο;η ην ωφη ευσαγγελιζομενο; [euaggelizomenos] ε;σνωαπιοαν μου, ‘he was as one bringing good news before me’), but the reward for the good news (ευσαγγελια/euaggelia) was that David killed him.

¹ cf. the description of Vespasian in Tacitus.

² Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 724.

³ Robinson, *Faith’s Framework*, p. 52.

⁴ Robinson, *Faith’s Framework*, p. 53.

¹ Robinson, *Faith’s Framework*, p. 53.

However, none of these examples explains the use of *euaggelion* in the New Testament. What is evident in the New Testament is the way the *euaggelion* is presented as coming from the secular use, but with deeper and more significant connotations. Thus, when John the Baptist preached, although our translations suggest that ‘with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news [verb] to the people’ (Luke 3:18), the context makes the idea of ‘good news’ sound quite strange. John is proclaiming coming judgment and the consequent need to repent.

Robinson’s opinion is that:

It is linguistically naive to translate *euaggelion* in the New Testament as simply ‘good news’. There is certainly in the background the expectation that, for those who are ready for it, the *euaggelion* brings hope and rejoicing. But the word itself is much more loaded than that, having connotations of authority and power, as well as of a certain pomp or flourish appropriate to the significance of the announcement.¹

If this is so, then the idea of ‘good news’ becomes quite irrelevant; the point would be that this gospel comes with all the importance, and more, that any Roman imperial decree would carry. Its significance takes it beyond any notion of either ‘good’ or ‘bad’; this is the *euaggelion* of God and, as such, demands our total submission. Hence, the gospel is something which is to be obeyed. Thus we have the following:

¹ Robinson, *Faith’s Framework*, p. 53. I have not been able to verify it, but my suspicion is that the translation, ‘good news’, while having some Old Testament background as I have noted, draws as much from the word ‘gospel’ itself. ‘Gospel’ derives from the Old English ‘godspel’ meaning ‘good news’, and was the earliest English translation of εὐαγγελιον. As a translation, however, it actually begs the whole question. While etymology proves very little in the long run, we may also note that εὐαγγελιον commences not with the adjective ‘good’, but with an adverb, εὐς, meaning ‘well’. Possibly εὐαγγελιον could carry the meaning of ‘the message brought well’, that is, appropriately, considering its origin and content. It is a significant proclamation.

through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith* among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name [emphasis mine] (Rom. 1:5).

but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about *the obedience of faith* [emphasis mine] (Rom. 16:26).

in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do *not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus* [emphasis mine] (II Thess. 1:8).

For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not *obey the gospel of God?* [emphasis mine] (I Pet. 4:17).

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he *commands all people everywhere to repent*, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead [emphasis mine] (Acts 17:30–31).

What, then, is the content of such a significant proclamation? Paul’s answer to that question is in terms of his own priorities:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart’.

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:17–24).

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know

nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (I Cor. 2:1–5).

Those who believed Paul's message were able to see that what had gripped them was not the power of human eloquence, so valued by the Corinthians, but the power of God. Evidence for the power at work is given in I Thessalonians 1:4–10:

For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, *but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming [emphasis mine].

What is there in the proclamation of the cross of Christ which could bring about this response?¹ In II Corinthians, when writing of his own ministry, Paul wrote that:

¹ I raise the question whether the present practice of 'discipling' may, to a certain extent, be an attempt to make up for a deficient gospel. This by no means calls into question the desire to see people mature in Christ and the attendant ministry which will assist them to do so, but at least I must note that the verb, μαθητεύω, 'to make a disciple' (used in Matt. 13:52, 27:57, 28:19 and Acts 14:21 only), is never used for the life of Christian believers and, when used for the activity of the Christians, is only used in the aorist tense, implying a single action completed in the past. This would mean that the activity of 'discipling' is completed when the gospel is proclaimed and people respond.

... we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 4:5–6).

He is saying that he preaches the lordship of Christ, and that the result of this proclamation is to be understood in the same way that we understand creation. Then God said, 'Let there be light', now He shines the light of the knowledge of the glory of God into the human heart. The parallel with II Corinthians 5:17 is clear, 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' When the gospel is preached a new creation is brought into being. In particular, it is because when the gospel is proclaimed God Himself speaks. If nothing else, an awareness of this fact ought to cause those who carry the word of the Cross to 'tremble at the word'. Plainly they would have 'renounced the shameful things that one hides [and] refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word' (cf. II Cor. 4:2).

Romans 1:16–17 explains, or at least introduces, the way the gospel carries such power:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'.

In the gospel there is a revelation of the righteousness of God. To be decided is what is meant by 'the righteousness of God'. Often a distinction is made between the righteousness of God as an inherent attribute of His being and the righteousness of Man as a derived state of being.¹ That is, there is a righteousness *of* God and a

¹ See the dictionary articles for details; D. W. Diehl, 'Righteousness' in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 952–3; N. T. Wright, 'Righteousness' in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP, Leicester, 1988), pp. 590–2, etc.

righteousness *from* God. However, if we acknowledge the ontological unity of the creation with the Creator, then we may say that the righteousness of God is ontologically the righteousness of Man. Not that human beings have a righteousness of their own making or merit; rather, by virtue of being created in the image of God they participate in God's righteousness. N. T. Wright says that the word 'righteousness', 'denotes not so much the abstract idea of justice or virtue, as right standing and consequent right behaviour, within a community'.¹ But how does this apply to God? My answer would be to define the righteousness of God as '*God's total consistency with His own character which He both expresses and expects, and which He works for us in Christ*'. God's righteousness is therefore seen in the way God acts and in the way He expects His creation to act. The Law of Moses is seen, then, not as the capricious demands of God, but as a revelation of His own being and the consequent obligation upon His people. Of course, the law of God was a feature of creation before the Law of Moses was given. It was written on the hearts of men and women by virtue of their being in God's image (see Rom. 2:15) and it must indeed be written there again (Jer. 31:31–34).

The Fall only means that men and women have become *unrighteous*, living in denial and contradiction of their created being. In fact, it is this which Paul, in Romans, goes on to argue. Having said that the gospel is a revelation of the righteousness of God, he proceeds to show that that revelation comes in the face of another revelation, namely the wrath of God (1:18ff.). This wrath comes upon those who, by wicked works, suppress the truth of God (and so of themselves) which has been made plain in creation. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul shows that this situation arises from humanity participating in and reproducing the sin of Adam, but, nonetheless,

this is not a merely academic problem. On the contrary, human guilt brings men and women into personal conflict with God (see Rom. 1:30, 'God-haters'; Col. 1:21, 'hostile in mind'). Whatever they may acknowledge (and the heart remains deceitful above all things and desperately wicked), they are now living under the present, and in anticipation of the coming, wrath of God. They live under the curse of the Fall now and will one day face the consummation of wrath. Their unrighteousness results in the corruption of their conscience and the consequent pollutions of life. Their only hope lies in being restored to their created being: being a new, in the sense of *renewed*, creation.

As Romans continues, we see that the focus of the work of Christ on the Cross was nothing less than the bearing of God's wrath:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26).

Two points of clarification are perhaps needed. First, the word 'justify' is the translation of the verb 'to make or declare righteous'. I would strongly argue that 'to declare righteous' means 'to make righteous', not, of course, in the sense of sinless perfection now, but certainly in the sense that our righteousness is not simply that God 'treats us as righteous', or even that it is 'just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned'. Of course we have sinned and that cannot be erased from history, but the point is God does not call us one thing while we remain another. That would be the 'legal fiction' which many have

¹ Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 591.

complained about. The point is that to be justified is to be washed clean from all sin (I Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5;¹ Acts 22:16; etc.). What is more, the present work of Christ is to keep us clean: ‘The blood of Jesus Christ . . . goes on keeping us clean from all sin’ (I John 1:7, again, with the stress that this does *not* imply sinless perfection). All of this is ‘by faith’, that is, a reliance on what God says, and not on what is seen. Faith always rests on the evidence of the word of God. It is, therefore, definitely not an ‘abstract’ matter.

The second is that the phrase used in the *NRSV*, ‘a sacrifice of atonement’ (Rom. 3:25), where ἱλαστηριον (*hilasterion*) refers to the removal of wrath.² God put forward Christ Jesus as ‘a *hilasterion* by his blood’, that is, his death on the Cross. The passage of Romans 5:1–11 is a significant summary:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we *be saved through him from the wrath of God*. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Christ has, as the *hilasterion*, borne the wrath. But Paul’s point is not that we are saved by information about what Christ has done, nor even by believing that information. Just as in II Corinthians 4:6, the gospel comes to men and women as the re-creative word, so in Romans the love of God which sent Christ to the Cross ‘has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5, 8). This is what is meant by saying that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This revelation is not the communication of information, but the bringing to new birth of a human being. The righteousness of God, the nature of unfallen humanity, is now revealed in the believer. He is a new creation.

It may bear some insistence by Paul, but ‘you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Rom. 8:9). This is because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), and it is the obliteration of all guilt which came to the hearers through the proclamation of the gospel. So Paul wrote to the Galatians:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? (3:1–2).

The public exhibition of Jesus as crucified was the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Gal. 1:6–9, where the issue is the gospel which is preached). Christ is preached as crucified for our sins and, when that proclamation comes, men and women see themselves as crucified with him (Gal. 2:19–21). When that is seen, and believed, men and women know the reality of the righteousness of God *within them*:

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to

¹ See *NRSV* footnote: ‘Gk washing’.

² See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Tyndale Press, London, 1965), pp. 144–213, esp. pp. 184–202, for what is, I believe, still the definitive study on the topic.

us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death *and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher [emphasis mine].

What is happening when the gospel is preached? From II Corinthians 4 we saw that it is God Himself, the Creator, who brings the re-creative word to men and women. According to Romans 10:17, it is Christ who speaks, 'So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ'.

Christ speaks and faith is born in the hearer. Yet the gospel is the word of the Cross (and, of course, the Resurrection, see I Cor. 15:3–12). If the Cross is the triumph of God over guilt, then we may conclude that the power of the gospel lies in the utterance of the crucified and risen Jesus who testifies to his own triumph by liberating men and women from their guilt. In other words, the proclamation of the gospel actually *effects* forgiveness and rebirth. This is surely what Jesus meant when he instructed the disciples in John 20:23, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'.

It is not that human beings can forgive those whose offence is against God and Him alone (Ps. 51:4), but it does mean that their word cannot be reduced to the mere impartation of information to be digested. Their word comes with such great power that either men and women will believe and know total forgiveness, or will refuse to believe and so be locked into their guilt. But the power lies in the speaker, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, who speaks out of his triumph. That is why we noted above that faith is not 'blind', but rather rests on the word of God. It is not just that 'it is written', but that the word has come personally, and spoken creatively, bringing the hearer back to the truth of creation. This is the great power, the *revelation* of the righteousness of God.

Power in the Church is found not in those things which are common to fallen humanity, false prophets and demons. It is found

in that which is unique to God, the power of the creative and recreative word, 'the word of God which is at work in you believers' (I Thess. 2:13).

— 4 —

THE POWER OF THE WEAK

In the previous chapter, we saw that the power of the gospel is nothing less than the power of the crucified and risen Christ bringing men and women to rebirth, and so to their true being as those created in the image of God. To reduce the gospel, in the mind of the preachers at least, to the mere imparting of information is a denial of the wonder of the unity of the preachers with the one whom they proclaim.

In this study, I want to answer the question, ‘What is the nature of the power that is presently at work in the believers?’ Ephesians 1:19 records Paul’s prayer that his readers may have the answer to this and other concerns revealed to them:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:17–23).

As with the truth of the righteousness of God which is communicated through the gospel, an understanding of our hope and of the

power which is at work for those who believe is, likewise, dependent upon a revelation.

The reason for this lies, I suggest, partly in the nature of the human conscience. Of itself, the conscience is structured to register the consistency or otherwise of our actions and intentions with the truth of the being of God. Writing of the theology of Martin Luther, Randall Zachman observes:

Thus Christ has two offices: the work of redemption, and the testimony about that redemption. Just as no one but Christ could perform the work of redemption, so no one but Christ could testify as to the significance of that work; for the testimony that God wishes to be gracious to sinners is unknown to the heart, mind, and conscience of humanity . . .

If only Christ can bear witness concerning himself and his work, then it follows that we cannot verify his testimony by what we see and feel. All other forms of human testimony can be verified by empirical testing. ‘In other books and arts you must study and put all things to the test so that you may hear and understand and grasp what is presented.’ This is even true of the law of God revealed in his Word: we must find and feel within us that which the law tells us outwardly, even if this feeling is effected by the inner working of God. The testimony of Christ, however, cannot be verified by what we see and feel, for it speaks of things not revealed anywhere else on earth. ‘The nature of bearing witness is that it speaks of that which others do not see, know, or feel; but they must believe him that bears testimony.’ This is especially true of Christ’s testimony to the mercy of God toward those who feel their sins and the wrath of God; for such testimony is directly contradicted by the feeling of the conscience. Those who accept the testimony of Christ must ignore what they see and feel, and follow only what Christ tells them. ‘A Christian, however, is not guided by what he sees or feels; he follows what he does not see or feel. He remains with the testimony of Christ; he listens to His words and follows Him into the darkness.’ The testimony of Christ cannot be supported or verified by feeling, especially the feeling of the conscience. Rather, the Word of Christ is accepted only by faith, which acknowledges that God is true even when God tells us things that transcend or contradict what we see and feel.¹

¹ R. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 58–60.

‘At every point’, says Luther, ‘we live with a great contradiction. What we see and feel stands in contrast to what the word of God says.’ Luther called this contradiction between experience and the word ‘the theology of the cross’, and contrasted it with ‘the theology of glory’:

Whereas the theology of the cross comes to the knowledge of God through the indirect and hidden way of the cross, the theology of glory attempts to know God directly through what is apparent in the world. ‘That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.’ The theology of glory finds a direct continuity between what it sees and feels and what it believes about God, whereas the theology of the cross finds a contradiction between what it sees and feels and what it believes. ‘Nature wants to feel and be certain before she believes, grace believes before she perceives.’¹

The implication of this is enormous. The temptation to locate the power of God in the visible or tangible will, according to Luther’s framework, leave us open to either presumption or despair. Either the conscience will like what it *sees*, and so approve us on the basis of what we have done, or it will condemn us *on the same basis*, and leave us with our guilt. But with the ongoing revelation of the word, for justification there will be the added element of Christ’s testimony to himself as the crucified Lord, ‘who takes away the sin of the world’.

So it is with the matter of an understanding of our hope and of the power of God. Who can know the truth of our hope unless the promises of God are revealed? That does not mean simply recited. It is possible to hear the words but not to have them as a revelation from God. And, as we have seen, to assume that what we see is the

truth of the power of God may be an immense deception, since miracles and transformed lives and so on, including a ‘sense’ of being without guilt, can be obtained from a variety of sources. We would be quite naive to argue otherwise, since, if people could not find their desires for experiences satisfied from those sources, they would have left them ages ago and, of themselves, searched for the truth of God. This, as Scripture plainly asserts, they cannot and will not do. ‘No one seeks for God’ (Rom. 3:11), and ‘No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me’ (John 6:44). Of course, I am not suggesting that men and women can survive on those sources. God has subjected creation to futility, so that at every point it will fail to satisfy. But my point is that the deceptive human heart will assume that it is satisfied and rationalise its failure.

Another reason why revelation is required lies in the nature of a human being. Ecclesiastes 12:13 concludes, ‘The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone’. A human being finds himself only in obedience. From the beginning, no person could know true humanity until he or she lived in the fear of God and in obedience to Him. Of course, an examination of the Scriptures shows that this ‘fear’ and ‘obedience’ does not imply some sort of cringing indignity. Where there is no guilt, obedience is a joy, although, it must be admitted, this is not the way the matter appears. Apart from ‘revelation’ coming to us, fallen flesh will always resist the claims of God. But we do have the revelation. It is in the person of Christ who stood as *the* man without guilt and so declared:

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (Heb. 10:5–7).

The Hebrew form of this declaration, in Psalm 40:6–8, is even more powerful: ‘I *delight* to do your will, O my God; your law is within

¹ Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, p. 19.

my heart'. Within the context of the Psalm, this refers to the person who has been redeemed:

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he inclined to me and heard my cry.
 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
 and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.
 Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD (Ps. 40:1–3).

But there is more to it than this, because Paul wrote that the law is written on the heart of Gentiles, meaning that it was the true orientation of humanity prior to the Fall. As we observed in the last chapter, it is the nature of redemption to again write the law in the heart (Jer. 31:31–34; cf. Heb. 8:8–12). If this is so, then we may conclude that Jesus is both the revelation of unfallen Man, and also the revelation and representative of redeemed Man. This is not to say that Jesus somehow had to know redemption; rather it means that redemption brings us back to the truth of our humanity. That is, we become a renewed creation.

So, to understand ourselves we must not look at ourselves. Christ is the pattern; we are in him. So, then, how do we see him? The answer is that as a man he was weak. So II Corinthians 13:3–4:

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. 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.

To say that Christ was crucified in weakness does not mean that he was not strong enough to escape so unpleasant a fate.¹ In fact, he himself insisted that, had he chosen to do so, he could have asked the Father for twelve legions of angels in order to be rescued (Matt. 26:53). His choice *not* to do so represented the weakness of total

¹ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, A. & C. Black, London, 1973, pp. 335f.

submission: 'But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' (Matt. 26:54).

At this point it is worth observing that Jesus' weakness is probably not to be understood as some sort of deprivation. In II Corinthians 8:9, when urging generosity on the part of the readers, Paul wrote:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

The assumption that this is a description of the incarnation¹ would, it seems to me, be quite wrong. There are a number of reasons for this,² but chief among them would be the mistaken identification with unfallen humanity and poverty. Take, for example, the language of Psalm 8:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 mortals that you care for them?
 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under their feet,
 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas (Ps. 8:3–8).

¹ See, for example, C. K. Barrett:

Before the incarnation, the eternal son of God lived the life of heaven, which, to Paul, must have been desirable in every way, and could be anthropomorphically depicted in terms of wealth. To be born of a woman, born under the law (Gal. iv.4) was, in every possible sense, a step down (*A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 223).

² See James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Decline of the Incarnation* (SCM, London, 1989), pp. 121f.

What seems obvious to me is that created Man was incredibly rich. To him was given all the glory of God and the dominion over all that God had made. The poverty of Man was to be found, not in his humanity, but in his sin. If there is a commentary on II Corinthians 8:9 immediately to hand, it is surely II Corinthians 5:21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Christ's becoming poor for us was not his incarnation, but his atonement. His weakness in which he was crucified was his humanity. He lives now, as he always lived, by the power of God (II Cor. 13:4). Likewise, 'we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God' (II Cor. 13:4). The context of Paul's dealing with a specific issue in Corinth aside, the principle remains that both Christ and those in him are ontologically weak and only know power as weak persons. Of himself, Christ, either as pre-existent Son or as incarnate Son, had no power. The only power available to him or us is the power of God, that is, the power of the Father.¹

In the light of this, Paul's language in II Corinthians 12:1–10 appears as a deliberate reference to the *presumed* power of the false apostles in Corinth:

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person— whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on

¹ It seems to be a valid observation that, unless the context demands otherwise, the word 'god' in the New Testament is a reference to the Father. See Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 271, 'Whenever (οὗ) θεοῦ is found in the NT, we are to assume that οὗ πατρὸς is the referent unless the context makes this sense impossible'.

my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul is not saying that the Lord occasionally gave him bouts of weakness and that it was at those times that the power of God was available to him. But he is extolling his 'weakness', which was in stark contrast to the 'power' claimed by his opponents. We might compare I Corinthians 1:26–29:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

The irony of the language should not be overlooked. There are no times when we are not weak, and there is no power which is not from God. All human boasting is thus excluded. This does not mean that God somehow wants to humiliate us by depriving us of any grounds for boasting. Rather, by depriving us of grounds for boasting He is restoring us to our true humanity:¹

For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness *in him*, who is the head of every ruler and authority (Col. 2:9–10).

¹ 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'.

We see a similar situation described in Galatians 5:22–23:

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

While we indulge in the works of the flesh, the law stands as judge over us, with the result that we cannot know the liberty of justification. But what is the alternative? The answer is ‘the fruit of the Spirit’.¹ These are the elements which the Spirit evidences in the lives of those who ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:16). They are not, therefore, elements which the believer is under an obligation to produce. Indeed, such an obligation would be a terrible judgment, since no persons can, of themselves, produce such fruit. Nor were they ever intended to do so. These are the fruit of God Himself, which are produced when a man or woman lives in God through the work of the cross of Christ. As such, they are the fruit of the first creation which was corrupted at the Fall and which has been made new through Christ.

One of the fruit demands our attention. It is the fruit ‘self-control’. The Greek word *εγκρατεια* (*enkrateia*) has a significant place in Greek ethics. It was a high virtue to be self-controlled.

The idea of *enkrateia* is first introduced into ethics by Socrates as one of the chief virtues . . . Plato and Aristotle adopted it in turn. For Plato *enkrateia*, the control of the sensual drives, is basically a popular expression for *so-phro-sune*² . . . According to Aristotle, the one who is *enkrateis* has strong desires but is able to suppress them, whereas the one who is *so-phron* is elevated above all such fierce drives . . . Among the Stoics, *enkrateia* was taken as a sign of human freedom. It was part of being truly human to moderate one’s desires, particularly one’s sexual drive and enjoyment of food and drink. The Neo-Pythagoreans developed a dualistic system: the body must be kept in check through asceticism, so that the soul may rise to God. In

¹ A helpful summary of these ‘fruit’ is Geoffrey Bingham’s *The Spirit’s Harvest* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987).

² Soundness of mind, good sense, sanity, self-control.

making one fit for cultic worship, asceticism also played a large part in the ancient world. Philo praised *enkrateia* as transcendence over one’s desires and passions . . . The Essenes at the time of Jesus are known to have recommended celibacy, and also to have lived ascetically in various other ways, e.g. in regard to possessions, food and vigils.¹

Surprisingly, perhaps, the word is rarely used in the New Testament. No doubt it is because the gospel reveals that personal ‘self-mastery’ is a false notion; there is no such thing as an autonomous person and ‘self-control’, power over oneself, is not possible for a human being, not even a redeemed human being. Self-control can only be a fruit of the Spirit, and it is this which is in evidence in Jesus. For instance, he said:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

His self-control lies completely in his submission to the Father (which we see elsewhere as his complete submission to the Spirit).

Yet there is self-control! Weakness, such as we have described above, does not imply that we have an excuse for ethical passivity. If the gospel has come to us and freed us from guilt, then it comes as the gracious command of God, and with the command is the power to obey. Thus Paul wrote:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions (Rom. 6:12).

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and

¹ H. Baltensweiler, ‘Discipline’, in C. Brown (ed), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1: A–F, Paternoster, Exeter, 1975, pp. 494f. See also W. Grundmann, ‘εγκρατεια’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Kittel (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 339–342.

hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:17–24).

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col. 3:5–11).

The commands are not directed to autonomous men and women, but to those who are liberated by the gospel and are now ‘in Christ’; they have ‘learned *Christ*’ (Eph. 4:20). The moral imperatives which come to us are not ‘ideals’ to be pursued, but a reality to be lived in ‘in Christ’.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (I John 2:1).

THE POWER WHICH PRESERVES

The Apostle Peter wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable,

undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (I Pet. 1:3–9).

And Jude wrote:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24–25).

We are under an obligation to live by faith. This is the truth of human beings, and it is the way the great revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel is received, ‘from faith to faith’ (Rom. 1:16). That is why the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ purifies our faith by means of necessary trials. It must be noted that He is not testing us to see if we have enough faith; rather, He is purifying in us that which He has already given in order that the goal He has set may be reached and that, at the same time, we may stand in the full dignity of those who have been freed to exercise moral responsibility (see I Pet. 1:13–21). The goal is not a race of redeemed robots, but many ‘sons in glory’.

Yet our confidence does not lie even in our moral responsibility. When all is done, ‘he is able to keep you from falling’. ‘Glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time and now and forever’ belong ‘to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Jude 24). The glory to be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18) is not a tantalising possibility, but an absolute certainty. Our own weakness, both as creatures and as those whose bodies are still a hindrance to

the fulfilment of our desire for obedience (see Rom. 7:24; 8:23), is not a problem for the purpose of God. The end of Romans chapter 8 highlights this:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:26–39).

God has justified us, therefore our weakness, even our sinful weakness, cannot call that work into question. As far as the purpose of God is concerned, the goal is complete. Christ has been glorified and we are in him (8:30). The Holy Spirit and Christ Jesus intercede for us and do so in total consistency with the will of God. As a result, no matter what we may experience or what opposition we

may face, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:39).

The power which is at work for us (Eph. 1:19) is seen by revelation; it must be by revelation, since all that we see combines to call it into question. But it is not, therefore, diminished. It is the power by which God raised Jesus from the dead, and it is the power by which we will attain to the resurrection of the dead, the redemption of *our* bodies. For the present, the only resurrection we know is Christ's, but that is sufficient; he is the pledge and ‘the first fruits of those who have died’ (I Cor. 15:20). The power of God is at work ‘behind the scenes’, because the scenes are passing away; ‘what is seen is temporary . . . what cannot be seen is eternal’ (II Cor. 4:18).