

*Introduction:* The conversation with Jesus (9:28-29) is private, brief, and moving. It follows on the crisis in which the disciples failed and their Lord triumphed. The narrative reveals not only the crisis for the disciples, but also the crisis in the church. The emphasis of this crisis is the supreme power of God and the fervent prayer of God's people.

"Let me tell you what was certainly the greatest nights that Lorna and I have ever had in a church service." With these words, Rev. Edward (Ted) Donnelly (former pastor of Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, Newtownabbey, Northern Ireland, and professor of New Testament language and literature at the Reformed Theological College in Belfast) begins to recount an extraordinary evening on Wednesday, July 2, 1997. He is preaching at the Southeastern Reformed Baptist Family Conference held on the 125-acre hilltop campus of Bryan College in Dayton, Tennessee. The college is located within the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, and forty minutes north of Chattanooga. In Rev. Donnelly's first two messages he preached on the doctrine of hell: "Why consider it?" and "What does the Bible teach?" He describes the extraordinary third night of the conference this way.

"On the third night of the conference, there were about 800 people there. I was preaching on the subject, 'What will hell be like?' As I preached, we all became aware of a presence -- very hard to explain. Everybody got phenomenally quiet. Nobody moved. I preached for quite a long time, probably an hour and a quarter on, 'What will hell be like?' Then I finished the sermon and sat down.

"Of the eight hundred people nobody moved. Nobody spoke. It was silent, total silence. After a few minutes the chairman stood up and said, 'I think we should cancel the rest of this evening's program and I think we should all go and seek God.'

"We then spent, I don't know how many hours, with experiences that we never had before or since to the same degree. We went into one room on the university campus and it was full of parents, perhaps forty or fifty, weeping and pleading for the salvation of their children. We went out, after a long time of praying with them, into the beautiful campus of Bryan College. It was dark. Almost the whole campus was covered with people on the grass. Some of them were on their knees. Some were in groups. Some were crying out to God. There was another prayer meeting of young people in the administration building, which was nearly all night. There were fellows and girls ringing their brothers and sisters in California and Canada and saying to them, 'You have to believe in Christ.' 'You have to be converted.'

"It's hard to say how many people were converted that night. We can certainly say that there were at least 50 or 60 people converted that night, maybe far, far more. We still hear of people who were converted that night.

"What happened? God the Holy Spirit came down. He blessed His Word. I preached the next night, just as good a sermon. Nothing happened as far as we know. I could hardly wait to get back to Trinity to preach this sermon.

"I preached it in Trinity. Nothing happened as far as we know. It wasn't me. It wasn't the sermon. It was God. God chose to work. I'm telling you that, not to make myself out as a great preacher -- it has nothing to do with that nonsense -- but to give you a glimpse of the power of God."

Has there ever been a time when the church has been more inflated with its opinion of its own ability? The church has adopted the how-to methodologies of a hundred different writers. The church has adapted the programs of the church growth movement. The church is self-confident that it can solve the problems of evangelism.

However, we have no power to stop the slaughter of abortions, or the abomination of homosexuality, and the feminization of the home, the church, and our society. We have no power to open deaf ears to hear the gospel or dumb lips to preach the gospel. We have no power to deliver our neighbors' children from the dominion of state indoctrination that has banished the reality and relevance of the Triune God. We have no power to expel the demons of self-reliance, self-gratification, and self-exaltation. We have no power to mend the feuds that have split congregations and have divided families. We need to understand the crisis in the church as revealed in this passage. We need to understand the private words of Jesus, "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting."

We may outline this passage with three headings:

- a. The Severity of the Situation (9:14-19)
- b. The Supremacy of the Savior (9:20-27)
- c. The Solution for the Saints (9:28-29)

#### A THE SEVERITY OF THE SITUATION (9:14-19)

1. The disciples have been without the physical presence of Jesus (9:14).
  - a. Absence of the transformation for the nine apostles
  - b. Absence by the ascension for the Roman Christians
2. The disciples are surrounded by religious mockers (9:14).
  - a. The nine disciples are heckled and taunted by leering, self-satisfied scribes.
  - b. The disciples have attempted an exorcism and have failed. The scribes are deriding them for their powerlessness, and are blaspheming Jesus as well. "The messenger is as the man himself. You are phonies and so is your master!" they shout.
3. The disciples are confronted with a strong enemy that presents four problems (9:15-18)
  - a. **Problem of demons** -- The boy is possessed by a demon that foils nine disciples.
  - b. **Problem of death** -- The demon works to destroy boy.
 

The sporadic attacks, helpless youth, and the long-term affliction indicate that the purpose of demonic possession is to distort and destroy the image of God in man.

This destruction heaped upon a child indicates how radical the issue is between demonic power and Jesus the bestower of life.
  - c. **Problem of defeat** -- The disciples are unable to cast out this demon. The witness of the gospel is harmed. The father questions Jesus' power.
  - d. **Problem of direction** -- What is Jesus teaching as to the direction of power?
 

To the father, Jesus says, "Believe" (9:23).

To the disciples, Jesus says, "Pray and fast" (9:29).

To the demon, Jesus commands, "Come out" (9:25) without waiting either for great faith or for fervent prayer.
4. The disciples are rebuked by an exasperated Master (9:19)
  - a. Jesus' initial response is both a diagnosis and an emotional cry from the heart. The first word, "Oh," is rarely used in addressing others directly, and expresses deep emotion.
 

"O faithless generation!" = You disciples are just like the rest of this generation!

"How long shall I endure you?" = Will you ever learn?
  - b. Jesus is in lonely pain and exasperation. His disciples had failed! He had earlier commissioned them in Mark 3:14-15, "... to preach, and to have power to heal

sicknesses and to cast out demons” They were successful earlier, but now after a week of His absence, they are powerless.

- c. Their failure is not because they did not try. They did their best. Their problem is *unbelief*. They believe in the process, or the program. They believe in themselves because they had done it previously, but they are not resting their faith on Jesus.
  - d. Their confidence is in their own power, or the words, or the methods they used, rather than in God who gave them power to work miracles. They are overtly self-confident rather than consciously God-confident.
5. These are fitting words for the church today, which is so well-equipped with programs, so rich in funds, so instructed in doctrine, and yet so powerless before the forces of evil.

**B. THE SUPREMACY OF THE SAVIOR (9:20-27)**

- 1. The participants challenge the Lord’s sovereignty (9:20-22).
  - a. The scribes wait in silent skepticism.
  - b. The demon openly rebels against the Lord.
 

The demon seizes the boy (9:18). The child screams (Luke 9:39). The demon throws him to the ground where he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes stiff as a board (9:18). Many times the demon has thrown him into fire or water (Matt. 17:15) so that he is covered with burn scars.

Even worse, the demon has made the boy deaf and dumb (9:17, 25). He lives an aquarium-like existence. He can see what was going on around his pathetic body, but he cannot hear or speak.
  - c. The father questions the ability of the Lord.
 

He hopes that Jesus is a little more powerful and a little more wise.

The father questions the power of Jesus to bestow a blessing. Earlier a leper, while questioning Jesus’ willingness to heal, does not doubt His power, and is cleansed of his disease (1:40-42).
- 2. The Lord rebukes the father (9:23-24).
  - a. The error is in the father’s unbelief. The ability is in the Lord’s sovereignty.
  - b. When Jesus says to the father, “If you believe all things are possible,” He is NOT saying, “Work at having faith.” It is a great error to imagine that faith is something that we do, or that we work up in ourselves. This conceives of faith as a work that gets God’s favorable attention. This thinks of faith as a muscle which if exercised gets bigger and stronger. This makes faith some quantity within ourselves that we can pile up. Jesus is talking about faith as that which looks to Him and trusts in Him. Faith is always defined by its object. Faith is never a thing in itself. Faith looks to another. Faith is trusting in or relying on Jesus.
  - c. The father rightly understands this and correctly responds, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Subdue those areas where I do not trust You.
- 3. The Lord expels the demon (9:25).
  - a. The word of Jesus is absolute power (positive and negative command).
  - b. The will of Jesus is absolute authority.
    - 1) Immediate release (cry of demonic hatred and subjugation)
    - 2) Total release (as dead)
- 4. The Lord restores the boy (9:26-27)
  - a. The Savior frees the boy.

- b. The Savior raises the boy.

**C. THE SOLUTION FOR THE SAINTS (9:28-29)**

- 1. Disciples request the reason (9:28).

The honest efforts of God’s servants sometimes end in failure. This is a public failure for Jesus’ disciples. They are defeated, dejected, downcast, and discouraged. They have no answer for their enemies. They profess to represent Jesus, but they have no power to exorcise this demon.

This event is a picture of the present state of the world. In the boy we see a picture of the dominion of Satan, and the power that deceives people. In the disciples we see a picture of the church as she appears to be failing in her mission of breaking the power of Satan upon sinners. The church is most active yet is failing. The spiritual power that she knew in previous decades is not present. New Testament history and church history record the triumphant advance of the church over the powers of hell, but that is not our experience. We are not successful as in the days following Pentecost, or in the days of the Reformation, or in the days of the Revivals.

- 2. Jesus explains the solution (9:29).

When Jesus says to the disciples, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting,” He is NOT saying, “It is not enough to believe; you must also pray and fast.” It is a terrible error to imagine that prayer is a work that we do. Prayer is a manifestation of faith.

- a. **“This kind”**

- 1) There must be a real understanding of the problem facing the church.

The disciples had cast out demons on other occasions. They assumed this was the same as before.

The church is busy with activities but uninterested in doctrine. The church sees the world’s attraction to entertainment and so revises the service to be entertaining. The church adjusts its programs to match the desires of the people and not the revealed will of the Lord.

The church fails to understand the nature of the problem.

- 2) There needs to be a comparison to earlier generations.

The great difference between today and one hundred years ago is that people then were in a state of apathy. There was no general denial of Christian truth. People simply did not bother to practice it. There was a general acceptance that the Bible was God’s Word. All that was required was to rouse them, and to disturb them out of their lethargy. The apathy we face today is not in the world but in the church.

The problem confronting the church today is deeper and more desperate than has faced the church for centuries. What we face today is a denial of absolute truth, and a denial of the relevance of God. The very belief in God has virtually disappeared. Keeping within our group of Christian friends we are insulated from the apostasy and abomination around us. God and religion are tolerated for the less enlighten of our culture. Our society denies that Scripture is the inspired Word of God. If God has any place in our culture He is an annoyance.

- b. **“Can come out”**

What they did before worked, but it does not work with this kind of satanic opposition. The power the disciples had for previous cases is not sufficient for this case. What worked in previous generations to break Satan's power is not working today. It is obvious that so many of the things in which we trusted are proving to be of no avail. We are not seeing souls saved regularly.

The trend is to use psychological pressure to put guilt upon people, and to saturate the message with "love." Those who get people to walk down the aisle think that they are successful.

c. **"By nothing but prayer and fasting"**

Unbelief results in spiritual weakness. Lack of faith is a result of a lack of prayer. Prayer is an expression of believing. Prayer recognizes that Jesus has all power.

Fasting does not make prayer more effective but more intensive. The purpose of fasting is to set aside something good God has given us in order to seek the Lord's wisdom, guidance, help, deliverance, or glory.

The church will continue to fail until she feels her utter need for the power of God's Spirit. We must realize that we are desperate. The church must turn from all her methods and seek her Lord.

*Conclusion:* After describing that remarkable work of God in the family conference at Bryan College in 1997, Rev. Donnelly concluded:

"God can do more in a minute than we could accomplish with all our efforts in a lifetime. We've got to plead with God in a new way for the outpouring of His Spirit. God could blow our minds in our churches with what He could do. He could do more than we could even in our wildest imaginations. He could bring tens of thousands of people into the kingdom. He could transform our churches. He has the power to do it, just with His finger. It's nothing with God.

"We have to be careful. It's so easy for us to get fascinated with our strategies and our plans and our goals and our committees. There is a place for that. It's easy for us to say that we rely on God. But sometimes we make our plans and then ask God to bless them after we've made them. The church is not a business enterprise. It's an exhilarating mystery.

"People have said to me over the years, 'What strategy did you have for Trinity. You have known some blessing.' I've said, 'We didn't have any strategy and I don't believe people who have strategies.'

"We have to have the courage and the faith to throw away the safety net, to plead as we have never pleaded before for the Spirit's power and to proclaim Christ. That's all. Proclaim Christ and trust the Holy Spirit to bless. So what happens will be so unpredictable and so unexpected that it will be clear to all of us that God has done this. I'm not minimizing planning. We have outreach committees and planning boards. But what I want to see happening in the RP Church in the next five years is something that nobody has even thought of. And they will say, 'God has done this.'"

Do you see the depth of the problem facing us this day? Will you pray earnestly for God's power to fall upon His people? "This kind can come forth by nothing but prayer and fasting." Nothing apart from the power of God will avail. There is no hope until the members of the church are praying, praying with each other, praying anywhere and everywhere. We desperately need the power of God. That is the crisis in the church.

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Psalter Selections: 38D, 25D, 77B, 85A

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:14-29

Audio Resources:

- \* Alan Cairns, **Remedy for a Powerless Church**, Mark 9:14-29, 07/03/2001, Faith Free Presbyterian Church, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)
- \* Edward Donnelly, **The Preaching of Christ**, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, 09/08/2007, Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, Young Adults Conference '07, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com) [50:25-55:00; 57:15-59:10]
- \* W. Robert Godfrey, **Power for Christian Living**, Mark 9:14-29, 12/09/2003, Greenville Seminary & Mt. Olive, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)
- \* Gordon Keddie, **The Glory of Christ**, Mark 9:1-29, 03/05/2006, Southside RP Church, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)
- \* Titus Martin, **Everything is Possible**, Mark 9:14-29, 10/19/2008, College Hill RP Church, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)
- \* John Wagner, **Why Could Not We Cast Him Out?**, Mark 9:14-29, 07/06/2003, Covenant Free Presbyterian Church, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)

Context of the passage:

- a. Preview of glory (9:1-8)
- b. Pinnacle of glory (9:9-13)
- c. Product of glory (9:14-29)