
Where Does Power Come From?

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Introduction

As many of you know, my family is preparing in the coming weeks to relocate to Portland, OR for career reasons and in the Berry home we've been working pretty aggressively to socialize this idea with our 4 and 6 year old sons Theo and Reuben. Last Sunday night I was putting the boys to bed and I commented to Reuben, "You know our best friend is going with us to Portland, don't you?" Reuben says, "Who, who, who Dad, who's our best friend?" I said, "You know, our best friend! He's coming to Portland with us." Reuben says, "Who's our best friend Dad?" And Theo cuts in and says, "God!" And I say, "That's right!" Reuben looks at me and in a completely conversational tone, simply carrying the discussion forward says, "Is he flying or driving?"

While this was a humorous moment for me, the more I thought about it the more I realized that Reuben did what I often do - he confused the abilities of God with the abilities of men. I tend to think about God as if he were human, ascribing to him all the limitations, restrictions, and failures that are common to man... like needing planes and cars to travel long distances.

The reverse can happen as well. I tend to think about people and stuff as if it were God, ascribing to them all the power, ability, strength that only he has. I know that God is everywhere and his people are *almost* everywhere. They are certainly in Portland, Oregon. I also know that our loving Father has generously dispensed his grace and gifts to the church in all places. Yet, it is easy for me to catastrophize my family's relocation because the people in Portland, Oregon are not the same as the people in Dayton, Ohio, not the same as the people here at the Chapel... Even though the same God is there, I get caught up in thinking *that it is the people who are behind the power, the ministry, the gospel work...* and if the same people are not present then God's work will somehow be thwarted or not as good.

It is one thing when this happens to an individual or a family - it leads to wrong thinking, feeling, wanting, attitudes and actions. But when it happens to a whole church, the results can be wildly damaging. How do I know that? In the first recorded letter from Paul to the Corinthians, we have an example of a church that was suffering under a similar confusion. The church at Corinth was behaving in a way that exposed their wrong belief that the power for effective ministry came from people and the consequences were undermining the church itself.

Let's Pray.

Corinthian Context

This morning we are going to work our way together through 1 Corinthians 1. As you may recall, Paul wrote a series of letters to the Corinthians addressing a great many very difficult issues in the church. In the letters that we have recorded in Scripture, the very first issue he tackles appears in verse 10 of Chapter 1, suggesting it may have been heaviest on his heart or at the top of his list. Although Paul is, in Chapter 1, laying out the beginning of threads that will be pulled through the entire letter, we're going to look at Chapter 1 this morning mainly for its relevance to this first issue that Paul identifies. So we'll be a bit myopic, or shortsighted, on purpose, as we make selected observations throughout the chapter. Let's begin by reading together verses 1-3. [READ].

The Church is Bigger than You (vv.1-3)

Paul begins with what is a common greeting during that day. He notes in verse 1 that *he* is "called" and in verse 2 that the *church* is called -both by God. Note simply that God - *not man* - was the prime mover, the major actor, in both Paul's and the Corinthians' spiritual status. They were where they were because of what *God* had done. Paul was an apostle *by the will of God*, and the Corinthians are the *church of God* that has been set apart (or sanctified) *in Christ Jesus*. Neither Paul nor the church were independent agents in the scheme of life.

In addition to not being independent agents, they were not disconnected agents, living on an island that is somehow isolated in its concerns and actions. The Corinthians were *called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...* In two weeks we will send the Mercks off, in several more weeks out from then we will send a team off to Romania, in many weeks across every year we send Pastor Russ out to various far away places. Should this seem strange to us? Or is it simply a recognition that we are part of building a kingdom that is to be made up of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation that with them we might *call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

But it is not just international ventures we are talking about here - Paul's main point in this context is much more locally focused. We'll see the rationale more clearly when we arrive to verse 10, but note for now that Paul finishes his thought in verse 2 by stating the basis for unity in the church, saints everywhere *...call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*. Beloved, church is bigger than us. It is easy at times, as we will see, to think, feel, and behave in a way that seems to indicate that "we're" all there is, becoming overly internally focused on people and programs in a way that suggests God is not finally in control, that Jesus Christ is not finally behind the sustaining of the church... and that the ultimate ends of God the Father and God the Son are not global but rather local. If this was true, could Paul have genuinely said, *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* to the Corinthians? Recall, this church was a mess. If Paul thought that the local church was left to itself and its own powers - the wish for grace and peace to them would have only been a mean joke.

The Church is Completely Provided For (vv.4-9)

Paul goes on in verses 4-9 to remind the Corinthians why he is thankful to God for them... Interestingly, it has nothing do with them. It has *everything* to do with what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Let's read these verses together and as we do see if you can pick up on all the inclusive, comprehensive, extensive kind of language Paul uses - listen for words like "every" or "any" or "all" or phrases like "to the end". [READ].

It is easy to breeze past the usual introductory prayer that tends to show up in Paul's letters. But let's slow down and make a few brief observations. First, we already noted that Paul was not giving thanks to God for anything that the Corinthians had done for themselves. Second, it is also true that Paul was not thanking God for anything that he or Apollos or Cephas had done among the Corinthians. And third, remember that kind of language I asked you to listen for? Let's pull that out and see what we hear.

What had God done for the Corinthians? He had *given them grace* in Christ Jesus, he had enriched them in *every way* in *all speech* and *all knowledge*, and *confirmed* the testimony about Christ among them.

What was the result? They were not lacking in *any gift*.

When was this happening? As they waited for Christ - in other words, right now!

What could they expect in this interim period? That Jesus Christ himself would *sustain them to the end* and present them *guiltless* on the day they came face to face with the Almighty and Holy Judge.

What was key to keep in mind? *God is faithful*. And it is by *HIM* you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grace, enrichment, confirmation, not lacking, sustained, guiltless, called, in fellowship. What had God not done? The Corinthians, by virtue of God's work through Jesus Christ his Son, had *EVERYTHING* they needed - for *all of time*. The church is not to be a people marked by anxiety and striving, or complaining and grumbling, or fear and cowardice! No, the church is to be stable and secure people, unmovable in their faith. Believers unified in Christ are able to stand *firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by [their] opponents* (Philippians 1:27-28).

What is it like to know this? I can only give you human metaphors... I am, surely as many of you men are, blessed with a wife with whom I would attempt almost anything... even a flamingo. With her at my side I am emboldened and en-couraged. With the elders I have had the privilege of serving with at this Church I would storm the gates of hell. With my flock I would walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Think then, when we understand the fullness and completeness of what God has done for us through Christ - which is so unlike wives or elders or flocks in that we are all flawed and feeble - how much more at rest and at work we can be.

The Corinthians were part of an increasingly global network of saints who all had pledged allegiance to Jesus Christ. They were not alone. The Corinthians had been given everything

they needed by a faithful God who would sustain them until the end. They had no needs. Then what could be wrong? They had begun to depend on men.

The Church is Powered by the Cross of Christ (vv.10-18)

Let's read verses 10-18 [READ]. Paul had heard from Chloe and company that the Corinthian church was beginning to fall apart. There were divisions and the divisions were characterized by disunity - differences of opinion, differences of position, differences of judgment, quarreling, arguing, fighting. How were things supposed to be? You can check out 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 for fine detail, but let what Paul says here suffice: there was to be unity - the church was to be **united in the same mind and same judgment**. In terms of threats to the integrity of the church identified in the New Testament, this is one of the "big two," the other being false doctrine. Paul is about to make a high stakes intervention with the Corinthian church.

Paul explains clearly where the disunity was springing from. Verse 12 Paul says, **What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."** Without doubt, there were other issues that contributed to their disunity - for example see chapter 11 - but this is what Paul had decided to tackle first, giving it a sense of highest importance.

People had aligned themselves with men - apparently presuming that it was from men that power for ministry came. In doing so, they misaligned themselves with Christ. The incredulosity of Paul's response is palpable. He responds with a sharp series of rhetorical questions - he was not looking for anyone to answer - it was not a memory or knowledge test - no, the questions themselves were the point. The Corinthians were acting as if the answers to these questions were "yes!" Even though everyone knew the answers were supposed to be "no!" **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?** Paul's super-sized sarcasm here matches the scale of obscenity of the Corinthians' error. They had mis-attributed what only God could do to men. In one sense, you could rephrase with contemporary language and say, "How could you be so stupid?"

Paul does not stop there however. He goes so far to say that he actually **thanks God** that he had no part in baptizing most of them. Think about how special and precious the privilege of participating in baptism is for a pastor - the presentation of a new spiritual life - like the doctor presenting a new born baby - Paul says I'm glad I wasn't that guy! He is clearly disgusted and discouraged over the Corinthians' allegiances to men versus Christ - it made little difference that those allegiances were in part to himself. Paul knew he was not the reason that the testimony about Christ had been confirmed among them and to depend on his, or anyone else, would be a grave error. He was prepared to say about anything to get them to see this.

Why? Two clear reasons from this passage. First, it is obvious what allegiances to men creates - disunity. John 17 makes it clear that **unity** is the means by which the world is to see and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Disunity is nothing short of mission failure. Second, and perhaps even more unsettling, is what allegiance to men does to the cross - it empties it of its power. There is one thing and one thing only that explains power in the church, it is the **cross of Christ**, the good news of the **gospel**, these things are the **power of God**.

Beloved, I am not sure I could urge you strongly enough to fully comprehend this truth. Regardless of the ministry that we, the people, perform in the church - whether it be baptism or some other aspect of ministry - these things are NOT what is of *ultimate* importance. Of ultimate importance is the preaching of the gospel *because* by it we learn of the cross and the cross is the [power of God to us who are being saved](#). There is no other source of power in the church. It is certainly not in men, like Cephas, like Russ, like Apollos, like Devon, like Paul, like Dale...

An intruder could wander into a church in Charleston, South Carolina, or into a church on a Tuesday night in Springboro, OH and end the lives of all 10 pastors in the blink of an eye... Is it sad and tragic? Deeply. Does it spell certain doom for the church? The answer of history and the Scriptures themselves is a resounding "NO!" So long as this church were to install biblically qualified men who preach the gospel, the power of God would continue to be present. The church is bigger than that! The church is more well supplied than that! It was never those 10 elders who were responsible for creating even one bit of grace, one iota of transformation, or one ounce of ministry success at the Chapel. It has always been the cross of Christ, as the gospel was preached, bringing the power of God.

Things will always be changing in the church and at the Chapel, people, faces, personalities, programs, ministries, etc. While this will bring sadness and transition, it should not bring discouragement or doubt because it was never the people that brought the power - it has always been the gospel that has brought the power. Therefore, God's people can rest in seasons of change.

The Church is Not Dependent on Worldly Wisdom (vv.19-25)

We must hurry on to close - we are not going to give verses 18-25 their due. [READ if time]. Here is a brief summary as it relates to the "man-centeredness" of the Corinthian church. Paul sets the [folly](#) of the [word of the cross](#) up against the wisdom and the wise of the world and basically says be careful that you do not attempt accomplish the work of the gospel through the wisdom of the world. This is related to that man-centeredness - it is looking for the power of God in places other than the cross of Christ.

What might it look like when this happens? Let me speak for myself. I live in a work world where self-help books dominate. I'm actually not talking about mental health or self-improvement. I'm talking about "organizational health" and "leadership improvement" - think John Kotter, Jim Collins, Peter Drucker, Jack Welch, Malcolm Gladwell, PI, QI, CQI, Lean Six Sigma... it goes on forever. It is a temptation to bring these various ideas and schemes into the church thinking if we would just find our hedgehog, or our big hairy audacious goal, or convince the people that the iceberg is melting that the church could really get moving and be effective...

Okay. I'll be the first to say that in God's common grace, there are many lessons to take note of from these authors and ideas. To dismiss the entire class of literature would be foolish. However, the moment that I begin believing that there is a worldly solution that will create power in the church other than the gospel itself I am setting myself up for emptying the cross of its power. In your heart it might sound like, "*If only the church would X*" (fill in

your favorite best-selling management philosophy), *then we would have what we need to be effective for the kingdom*. When this happens, the church becomes nothing more than a very well run and high performing locomotive hurtling toward hell.

As a case in point regarding the effectiveness of the foolishness of the cross, Paul in a very backhanded way says, "Hey buddy, look in the mirror (vv. 26-28)... If this seemingly over-simple out of fashion thing called the gospel could transform the likes of you, then maybe, just maybe, there is something to it. Of course if we are proud people, we will never see this because we don't see the transforming work of the gospel as a radical thing in our lives, we still see ourselves as somehow deserving of God's favor... even if it is just a teenie weenie bit, we see ourselves more wise or strong or worthy than what we truly are. Hence, only the humble can understand verses 28-31 [READ]. It is because of God and his gospel that we are in Christ Jesus. And from Christ Jesus we have everything we truly need - [wisdom, righteousness and sanctification and redemption](#). Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

I have used the idea of management philosophies as an example of a temptation to embrace the wisdom of the world as a gospel... that will only make sense to portion of you. It could just as easily be many other things from as simple as a certain style of worship music to a proven method for building the strength of a community to a particular program or ministry. The point is this - anything that displaces the centrality of the work and word of the cross as proclaimed in the gospel empties our church of power.

So let's wrap up with a few quick applications. Why does the church need to hear this?

1. Think globally, act locally. One of the best antidotes to reducing church to a man-driven event is to remember that you are part of something much greater than any man, or group of men, could ever accomplish. Only God could sustain Christendom - and he has promised to sustain you too, to the end, guiltless. In that confidence, ACT! You have everything you need - your life can be poured out without fear.
2. No change should be feared other than the change that moves the gospel out of the center. The Chapel is changing. People are changing, programs are changing, even processes are changing. Need you be worried? No. Should we be good stewards and see to it that the use of gifts and resources in the church are done in the way that produces the most glory possible? Absolutely (1 Peter 4:10-11), and that alone will require constant change. With that said, beloved, the centrality of the gospel, by God's grace, will not change at this church. Therefore, you can anticipate that you will continue to witness the power of God here at the Chapel.

Why do pastors need to hear this?

1. Men, beware of emptying the cross of its power with mannish endeavor, eloquent words, or worldly wisdom. This is certainly not a call to inactivity. Much can and should change in the church if you are to steward our varied graces well - those changes, however, must always strengthen and build up the centrality of gospel.
2. Lastly men, in humility, rest and work. Rest in realizing that it has never been us that has created grace or growth in this church. It has always been and always will be the gospel, the word of the cross. Work because you have been given everything you

need to give all you have - first at home, loving and leading your families and then in the greater church, sacrificially shepherding the flock... all the while boasting in the cross, which is the power of God for those who are being saved.

Let's Pray.