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6 REPORT

A Theology of Power

Madeleine Pennington and Paul Bickley

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Contents

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6

Introduction: What kind of power?

> *"What if the Western intellectual tradition at least since Nietzsche (but further back… to the ancient Greeks) is mistaken about power? What if there is another way? If the gospel really is good news for all creation, is it possible that the gospel is good news about power?"*[1]

This is the provocative question posed by Christian author Andy Crouch at the start of his 2013 book on power, *Playing God*. Crouch's question not only recognises the centrality of 'power' in Western discourse, but also its pervasiveness through every aspect of everyday human experience. Whose needs were met? Whose ideas carried most weight? Who made the decision? Who was in control? Whether in personal relationships, institutional representation, or ideas of 'the good life', what we think about power – and how much of it we have – will profoundly shape our perception (and experience) of the world around us. Right relationship with power really is good news.

However, power itself is rarely seen as a force for good in the world. Reflecting a growing awareness of the harms that power can bring, the exercise of power has come under ever more intense scrutiny over the last three generations, particularly in the West. The waning of colonialism across the world and the eclipse of a culture of deference within colonial powers has left an instinctive scepticism towards the way in which the minority world has (and continues to) exercise economic, military and cultural power without regard to its effect on the majority world. Meanwhile, within minority world nations, there has been sustained criticism of the manner in which authorities – including the government, legislature, police, and army – have been subject to corruption, or 'institutional' racism, or a culture of bullying. Commercial organisations, from

the pharmaceutical industry to Big Tech, have been condemned for mendacity and abuse of power, as have charity and development organisations.

Churches are sadly no exception here. Accusations of clerical sex abuse, and frequent examples of financial or sexual scandals, have severely undermined public (and, indeed, Christian) trust in the Church. At the same time, recent years have witnessed the rise of populist and 'strongman' leadership, and an increasingly destabilised geopolitical situation as a result; power as dominion is more 'in' than it has been for a long time.

Yet, for all these abuses, the exercise of power is remains crucial. Invested in the right places and with appropriate modes of accountability, it is vital in securing human well-being. The refusal to exercise power, ignoring the claims of justice or vulnerability, is itself potentially destructive. Thus, a mere hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to power itself fails to recognise the complexity of social and political life. In other words, trying to avoid power is not always a good thing. Alongside abuses and misuses of power sits the problem of under-exercised power and the refusal to take responsibility. Measures to empower individuals and groups, as well as the act of building power, is a necessary step in securing justice.

This tension between the abuse and abnegation of power points to the fact that assumptions about the nature of power itself are far from straightforward. The English word 'power' derives from the Latin verb *potere* (to be able), and a generic definition of power is simply the ability to achieve a goal. But there are many ways to pursue a goal – the capacity to make independent decisions, to overpower or manipulate others, to inspire a team, or to work

positively alongside our neighbours – and each of them implies a different view of power. In much the same way as Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished positive and negative liberty – the freedom to do something versus the freedom *from* interference – power, like freedom, is open to many subtly different interpretations.

We might distinguish the physical elements of power (strength, military might, good health, energy), the formal or structural elements (authority, high office, mandate, legal form, legitimacy), moral dimensions (ethical authority, virtue, divine strength), power that comes through skill (persuasiveness, charisma, fluency, expertise, ability), or social forms of power (wealth, influence, status, privilege). Moreover, just as physicists differentiate between various forms of energy which are constantly converted into other forms – light energy to heat energy, chemical energy to kinetic energy – but never destroyed, we might say there is a constant exchange *between* different sorts of power. Power is the shared currency at the foundation of human experience, and the exchange market is what we call 'power dynamics'.

As Andy Crouch's question above indicates, the Bible offers its own account of power. The purpose of this briefing paper is to consider what the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, says on this theme. Our discussion is organised into two parts:

1. **Power in the Bible:** What does the over-arching theological story of the Bible, and especially Christ's Incarnation, death and resurrection, reveal about the nature of power?

2. **Parables About Power:** What do the stories of the New Testament (moral and historic examples, parables, and the

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vignettes of Jesus' life and actions) tell us about how this theological picture might manifest in practice?

This short paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of everything the Bible (or even the New Testament) says about power. The biblical text contains many different genres and narrative elements, and attempts to flatten this rich variety risks ending in caricature. However, we do note some common trends and underlying assumptions which appear time and again.

In the paper we adopt the approach of narrative criticism/exposition, which acknowledges the complexity of questions around historical sources and processes of compilation, redaction and canonical development, but focuses on how biblical texts present sustained engagement with particular questions, in this instance issues around power and authority. We don't claim that all the biblical texts say the same thing or are capable of distillation into simple principles or even socio-political observations. Rather, an implied set of questions occur throughout the biblical metanarrative: who or what should be recognised as having authority, and of what kind? How is it exercised, and to what ends? What tensions exist between different powers, human and divine, and how will they be resolved? Considering how biblical texts address these questions is one important step in developing a theology of power.

Power in the Bible

Taken as a whole, the Bible is a record of salvation history, and power (correctly understood) is at the heart of the story. Starting with a consideration of power in the Hebrew Scriptures, through to Jesus' treatment of power and the witness of the historic early Church, the discussion below considers what the over-arching theological narrative of the Bible implies for how we should understand power.

Several themes emerge: power as divine creative action; God's gift of that power to other beings; the tragic reality of rebellion and misuse of gifted power for negative ends; the manifestation of spiritual power (both negatively and positively) in worldly institutions, relationships, and nature itself; and ultimately, the transformative potential of power (re)aligned with God's will through Christ.

Power and Powers in the Hebrew Scriptures

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under theirg feet:
all flocks and herds,

and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth![2]

The act of creation in Genesis is the first demonstration of power in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, God (alone) is the original being who exercises his creative power freely to create "the heavens and the earth". This gives the first clue as to a biblical understanding of power, indicating that creative power – divine power – comes first. As Andy Crouch reflects on the sort of power that derives from God:

> *Underlying much of the academic fascination with power... is the presupposition that power is essentially about coercion – that even when power looks life-giving and creative, it actually cloaks a violent fist in a creative glove. I believe this is exactly backwards.* ***I actually believe the deepest form of power is creation...***"[3]

But while creation is the deepest and first act of power, it is not the whole story – and in our own modern, human context, Crouch makes the case for power to be conceived more fundamentally as "gift". Not only is creation itself a gift from God, but God actively distributes his power, delegating authority over aspects of creation to others. In Genesis 1.26, "dominion" (*radah*) is given to image-bearing humanity: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds

Photo credit: Adam Haggerty / Christian Aid

in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Less well recognised is the fact that God makes the two great lights to "govern" (*memshalah*) the separated day and night (Genesis 1.16). This hints at an often unacknowledged tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures which identifies a divine council (Jeremiah 23.18, Psalm 82.1, Job 15.7-8). These created spiritual beings function almost as a royal court, sharing Yahweh's authority. This council bears various names – the hosts of heaven or even the "Sons of God" (with some popular English translations – for instance, the NIV and CEV – preferring to replace this term with "angels", even though the Hebrew word for angel is not the one used). Members of this court may even have specific roles, functions, or powers. Some do operate as divine messengers. Others – the cherubim – are often patrolling thresholds (e.g. the entrance to the Garden of Eden, or the entrance to the Tent of Meeting). The narrative element of Job sets out how the "Sons of God came to present themselves before Yahweh, and the adversary (*satan*) was with them" (Job 1.6). Here, "satan" is not a name/proper noun, but a functionary in the heavenly court whose task is to act as a prosecutor. Similarly, in Zachariah 3, the "satan" accuses Joshua and the High Priests, who are subsequently vindicated by Yahweh. These Sons of God are elsewhere connected with celestial bodies (e.g. Psalm 148.1-4).

Thus, Yahweh is the original source of all power but has created a range of beings – both heavenly and earthly – to whom authority is given. These beings collaborate in God's exercise of divine power – but are not the first cause of the creative power of Genesis 1. Indeed, Yahweh remains on stage as a final power, but both humans

and the divine council have their respective roles in the unfolding drama.

Part of this drama is rebellion against Yahweh. Eve and Adam step beyond the boundaries of their authority at the instigation of a snake. There are hints that the snake is more than a mere animal (the Hebrew word *nakhash* was one of multiple available names for a snake, but had particular associations with the words of sorcery/divination and bronze, a metal associated with heavenly beings in some prophetic visions).

This narrative sets the stage for repeated rebellion or failure of "powers" in the Genesis pre-history (chapters 1-11). Cain is warned that he must "rule" over sin, but fails. Cryptically, the Sons of God take human wives in Genesis 6, and God responds by limiting human life span to 120 years. God covenants with Noah's family, and reiterates the Edenic mandate to "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth", but interestingly *not* to subdue it (Genesis 10.1). In Genesis 11, humanity attempts to build a city which reaches heaven – implying yet another attempt to usurp divine authority.

Through these first chapters of Genesis, the interpretive framework for the whole biblical meta-narrative on power has been set. Power is the property of God. It is delegated to humanity, and likely to heavenly/spiritual beings, but it is quickly abused. Power is then a contested thing, though the narrative offers no suggestion that this is an even contest – only that humanity is held to account, disciplined and reduced – in the loss of Eden, in the flood, and in the scattering of the nations. "Spiritual" powers continue to hover in the background, and sometimes come to the foreground.

As primeval history moves into patriarchal history, the question of power and powers shifts focus. The power of Yahweh is exercised less through guiding human history as a whole than through his covenant with Abram for, in turn, the blessing of the nations (Genesis 12.2-3, paralleling the attempt of the Babel architects to "make a name for ourselves"). This is most dramatically demonstrated through the Exodus, which is a double-edged exercise of power: on the one hand, liberation for the people of Israel and, on the other, stringent judgement not just of Egypt's national power but also of Egypt's gods (Exodus 12.12).

It is notable that in the Exodus narrative and beyond there is a norm that, while specific individuals are chosen by God for specific tasks, power is generally best distributed. Moses – although in one sense a singular authority – takes the advice of Jethro to distribute the task of judging the people to others. Neither Moses nor his successor Joshua claim kingship, and the desire for a human king is later resisted by the prophet Samuel on the grounds that such a concentration of powers would result in oppression for the people (1 Samuel 8.10-18). If there is a norm for the structure of Israel's political life and power structure, it is that power is best kept dispersed and accountable: the kings remain accountable to the prophets.

Whether within or without Israel, perverted power is expressed in subjugation of vulnerable classes of people and through idolatry or faithlessness. Prophetic literature sees Yahweh judging social and spiritual disorder in tandem (e.g., Amos 3.13-15). The prophesied Day of the Lord (e.g. Isaiah 24.21-23) heralds judgement of human earthly power and of heavenly powers combined.

In that day the Lord *will punish*
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.
They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punisheda after many days.
The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the Lord *Almighty will reign*
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders – with great glory.[4]

Assumptions about Power in the New Testament

Moving from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament, the central framework for understanding power is clearly the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. However, power emerges as the driving force of events long before we reach the climax of the Passion narrative, and we must avoid the common temptation to fast forward to the cross and empty tomb before considering the authors' underlying assumptions about power more holistically.

The first helpful elements to note in this more holistic approach are the various Greek words translated as "power" in the New Testament text – and the authors deploy all this language in what we (as modern readers) might think are quite counterintuitive ways. The two main 'power' nouns applied to Christ's activities are δύναμις (*dunamis*) and ἐξουσία (*exousia*), appearing 120 and 104 times respectively. We can view them as the primary categories of power

Photo credit: Sean Hawkey

in the New Testament. In addition, the nouns κράτος (*kratos*) and ἰσχύς (*ischus*) appear 12 and 11 times respectively. Considering their meanings very briefly here:

- δύναμις (*dunamis*) is derived from the verb "to be able or possible", and can refer to capacity, force, ability, and deeds of power. It is the word used to describe miraculous activity, as well as the "power" which leaves Christ when he is touched by the haemorrhaging woman (Mark 5.30); it often implies the presence of divine energy from God. It can also be used to refer to moral excellence, though is also sometimes deployed with more negative connotations of spiritual battle, as when Paul tells us that the "power" of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15.56).
- ἐξουσία (*exousia*) has stronger legal and jurisdictional connotations than *dunamis* – it can even be translated as "magistrate" – but is, in a more abstract sense, the word used to describe Jesus' "authority" in teaching. It can also refer to physical and mental power, privilege, jurisdiction, and the freedom to choose (as in, being one's own master).
- κράτος (*kratos*) has more straightforwardly physical connotations of power, might, and dominion. It is less commonly used than either *dunamis* or *exousia* in the New Testament, though it notably often the word used to exhort God's power at the end of prayers and salutations.
- ἰσχύς (*ischus*) is often translated as "strength", but more generally denotes forcefulness, might or ability. It commonly has a literal, physical meaning, and is the word used when we are commanded to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind.

In the vast majority of instances, in line with the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament authors seem to use all this language primarily to describe the in-breaking of a spiritual reality into human experience: miraculous deeds, mystical capacity, the true power and authority of Jesus (often apart from worldly institutions that conventional wisdom would view as powerful), the hope and expectation placed in God's coming kingdom, a particular attribute of (or attitude towards) God, and so on.

Power understood in this way is at the heart of the New Testament narrative from the start, driving events forward despite the best efforts of worldly institutions, rulers and antagonists alike. To take examples from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark – the oldest account of Christ's life – John the Baptist foretells the coming of "one who is more powerful than I", evidently referring to something other than physical strength. Jesus is then baptised and recognised as "Son of God" by a "voice… from Heaven", and is driven into the desert by the force of "God's Spirit" to be "tempted by satan" as "the angels waited on him". He returns to teach as one with "authority" – unlike those whom society would have recognised as having any sort of institutional or formal authority at the time ("the teachers of the Law of Moses"). And it is the "man with an unclean spirit" who ostensibly acts as Jesus's first human opponent in Mark, so that even then, the spirit within the man is the real adversary.

In all these cases, such disruptive spiritual power is not divorced from our experience of the world and its powerbrokers; 'spiritual' does not mean 'less real'. On the contrary, firstly, it impacts directly upon the natural world: Christ feels "power" leave him when the haemorrhaging woman touches his cloak (Mark 5.25-34), and his "deeds of power" are often physical healings. So too, he has power

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over the natural world in miracles such as the Calming of the Storm (Matthew 8.23-27), Cursing of the Fig Tree (Mark 11.12-14), and the Miraculous Catch of Fish (Luke 5.1-11; John 21.1-14).

But more than this, it also has profound (and even dramatic) implications for human institutions, structures, and politics – even before Jesus is old enough to speak. Perhaps the most striking Gospel example is Herod's fear at the birth of a "child who has been born King of the Jews", leading to the massacre of the infants and the escape of the Holy Family into Egypt (Matthew 2.2, 1-18). The tragic irony of a leader unable to countenance any challenge to his power – even the hidden and spiritual power embodied in a vulnerable child – is simply the latest outworking of the rebellious pattern we see repeating from Genesis onwards. However, if the recurring focus of the Hebrew Scriptures is rebellion in the face of God's unwavering faithfulness, the New Testament heralds the dawn of a new promise, which will restore such broken power dynamics in a way never seen before – and this, too, has important worldly implications. Perhaps most famously of all, then, we hear Mary sing:

> *He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;*
> *he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*
> *He has brought down rulers from their thrones*
> *but has lifted up the humble.*[5]

In this way, the New Testament tells the story of a restorative victory – addressing broken relationships, inequalities, and human rebellion at all levels. Moreover, God's action here is not simply about destroying the powerful. Rather, God *both* brings down

the powerful *and* lifts up the lowly. In other words, there is a rebalancing of distorted power dynamics, as the original intention for divine, gifted power is restored. Throughout this story, God retains ultimate power. However, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, power is gifted by the Divine in a fluid exchange that pervades every element of human experience, and lifts up those we least expect – unlocking a new sort of power altogether in the process.

Of course, the precise relationship between Jesus' reconciliatory ministry and an obviously political movement is much contested. Christ has variously been understood having no interest in politics, and being the leader of a revolutionary sect like others common to his era. Neither position is sustainable, and both rely on the distinctly modern disintegration or dualism of the political and the spiritual and religious which doesn't do justice to texts in question. It is impossible to engage with Jesus' teaching without a rich appreciation of the social and political context and concerns of his era, and of early Christian communities. This paper broadly takes the position that reading Jesus' ministry in the theological context requires a framework which can capture both 'political' and 'spiritual' concerns together.[6] As above, his ministry has important political implications – indeed, he died a political death – yet we are invited to see Jesus' ministry, and the faith of early followers of Jesus more widely than this, not only as a political movement but as the emergence of the unfamiliar, hidden, and unexpected power of God against the powers of the world.

Indeed, the examples above can all be understood as "revelation" in the truest sense, since the power moving visibly through all these events is precisely the sort of power which normally remains hidden. If the New Testament authors were alive today, they might

advise us: to understand the outward forms of power in your own context, start by understanding what is going on spiritually and work out from there. To this end, followers of Christ are constantly warned against interpreting power as the world does. This warning is expressed most clearly in perhaps the central paradox of the New Testament: Paul's famous reassurance that our weakness is our strength.

> *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*[7]

In this sense, the Bible puts forward a consistent vision that true power is positive and God-given – but also that this gift can easily be corrupted by rebellion, and that our own capacity for power is unlocked above all through faithfully reordering our desires and resources back in line with God's will. This pattern is reflected throughout the New Testament, as the apostles are accompanied, and led directly, by God throughout the formation of the early Church. Any power they (and we) have is drawn from God. This is because, as he has done from the earliest chapters of Genesis, God responds to obedience with the gift of further power – whether by Christ giving the disciples authority to heal (Luke 10.19, Acts 5.12-16), God giving the early Christians the strength to serve

(1 Peter 4.11), or the power by which Christ Himself is declared to be Son of God (Romans 1.4). This constant pattern confirms the most basic principles of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which power is inherently dynamic and relational, gifted and exchanged. Yet it is, of course, perfected in Christ's own supreme model of submission to Divine will.

Power and Jesus

We have already noted that Jesus taught with "authority", and was clearly viewed by the New Testament authors as "powerful". Nonetheless, he also taught (and modelled) an understanding of truly transformative power coming precisely through the emptying of one's own apparent agency in service to God and love of neighbour. Christ is the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 (Matthew 8.17, Acts 8.26-35), silent in his trial and willingly betrayed and arrested (John 13.21-32, 18.1-11, Luke 23.9). He submits to God's will to die the humiliating death of a disgraced slave (Matthew 26.39). And yet, God loved him "because I lay down my life in order to take it up again", and "have the power [exousia] to lay it down, and... the power [exousia] to take it up" (John 10.17-18). This principle of "kenosis" (self-emptying) as the means of Christ's redemptive work is most famously expressed in the hymn of Philippians 2.5-11:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Consequently, while Christ's victory over death is confirmed by his resurrection, Jesus notably alludes to the crucifixion itself as the key moment of revelation – and indeed, of his glorification through death and betrayal – especially in the Gospel of John. Thus, in John 8.28-29, he refers to the crucifixion when he tells the crowd in the Temple, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he", and again in 13.31, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life". So too, he observes that a grain of wheat cannot bear fruit without falling to the ground and dying, as he diagnoses that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified". Following Judas' betrayal, Christ's immediate reaction is "Now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him"; he tells the disciples to put away their swords at the moment of his arrest; and he is silent at his trial.

The affirmation that transformative power has (and is being) released lies at the heart of this narrative, but the victory is secured precisely in the moments that feel like defeat.

What about Injustice?

We have now seen that the New Testament retains the basic framework of the Hebrew Scriptures, insofar as it perceives a positive and God-given role for power at the baseline of human relationships. Nonetheless, a full account of power must also recognise with the many ways in which human experience does not always (or even usually) reflect this positive vision – even despite Christ's victory through death and resurrection. What about the hard realities of deceit, manipulation, coercion, violence, and power abuse that run through (and even seem to define) so many human experiences, relationships, and institutions?

Jesus is clear about the reality of injustice – the continued rebellion against God's will – just as the broader New Testament canon narrates the imperfect and sinful nature of the current order throughout. In the first instance, he calls out particular injustices he witnesses throughout his ministry, for example declaring "woe" to the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23.13-26) and even displaying visible anger as he denounces those who defile the Temple with trade (John 2.13-25). Yet more than this, the evangelists clearly also understood Christ

Photo credit: Michael Preston

as an authoritative judge on a cosmic scale – as was expected of the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Isaiah 11.3-6, Isaiah 42.1-4, Genesis 49.10). We hear that "not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgement to the Son" (John 5.22), that he "did not need any testimony about mankind, because he knew what was in each person" (John 2.25), and that the Father has "given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man" (John 5.27). The title of "Son of Man" appears in all four canonical Gospels, and the Gospel of Thomas, and (while concurrently indicating Christ's humanity and humility) alludes to Daniel 7.13, in which "one like a Son of Man" is seen "coming with clouds of heaven" and is given "authority, glory, and sovereign power". This is, therefore, an office of judgement.

Recognising the ultimate God-giftedness of power itself does not therefore preclude a clear view of the harmful ways in which sin can distort this gift. On the contrary, this distortion is diagnosed, unveiled, and judged explicitly as part of Christ's revelation.

How might this relationship between legitimate and abused power work in practice? One depiction of distorted spiritual power which has attracted particular attention is the personified language of "the Powers" used by the New Testament authors. The words that are used to denote such Powers are commonly cognates of the terms discussed above. Thus, Paul talks about the *dunameis* as "the powers of this age" (Romans 8.38) and the *exousiai* or "authorities" (Colossians 1.16). He does, however, also make use of a wider vocabulary here, using the Greek work *archoi* to denote "principalities", *kyriotētes* translated at "dominions", and *thronoi* ("thrones") – all in the same verse! Colossians 1.16 is worth quoting in full:

> *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

So too, Paul talks of *archais*, along with *exousiais*, in Ephesians 3.10 ("the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"), and of *dynameōs*, alongside both, in Ephesians 1.21. Elsewhere (Galatians 4.3, Colossians 2.8, 20) Paul also refers to *stoicheia*, which can be translated as "elemental" things – sometimes interpreted as elemental powers or elemental principles/ideas.

These terms – variously translated as powers, principalities, authorities, dominions, and thrones – have long been subject of debate. There are times at which Paul seems to be using them to refer straightforwardly to human (i.e. 'political') authorities and times when he seems to be explicitly connecting them with spiritual beings, like angels and demons, which hold authority and power over or within the created order of things.

The result has been some confusion – or, more charitably, contradictory opinions – in which many Christians have seen the "powers and dominions" as exclusively spiritual agents, who are opposed to God's work and against whom Christians must wage "spiritual warfare" through prayer, fasting and other spiritual disciplines. Others attempt to demythologise this New Testament language, treating the Powers as social, political or collective psychological forces. Still others seek to hold a tension between actual 'spiritual' forces which manifest themselves not just at the personal level but also, perhaps even primarily, in the social world.

A good example of the demythologised approach to the New Testament is the widely cited work of Walter Wink and his *Powers* trilogy. Wink's fundamental thesis is that what the Bible refers to as "Powers" should be understood as "the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power". Wink views Powers not as separate or ethereal entities, but as the inner aspect of material or tangible aspects of earthly or material power. In other words (and consistent with what we suggest above) principalities and Powers are the inner or spiritual essence of an institution, state, or system:

> *As the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the "within" of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organisations of power. At the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the "chair" of an organisation, laws – in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes... When a particular Power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic.*[8]

Wink draws from this reading a conscious rejection of dualism between spirit and body, viewing Powers instead as "both heavenly and earthly, divine and human, spiritual and political, invisible and structural".[9] He also views Powers as capable of both good and evil – but his account offers a helpful framing of how wider cultures and systems, not just the unjust behaviours of individuals, can diffusely (and therefore, in a way that is especially elusive and difficult to tackle) amplify social and spiritual harm. Consequently, Wink frames unjust attitudes and practices as an imbalance – an idolatry – that the Church has a particular vocation in helping to return to God.

There are many things to commend Wink's reading, but he is open the accusation that he does not do justice to the imaginary of New Testament authors, who really did perceive a conflict between Jesus and his followers and agentic spiritual beings. Nor was this a peripheral superstition, but core to these writers' perception of salvation. On the contrary, for Paul, the cross is not just the means whereby human reconciliation and forgiveness is enabled, but where the Powers are judged:

> *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*[10]

Crucially, that 'judging' does not necessarily mean the Powers are destroyed. Indeed, earlier in this letter we read that these were created "for" and "through" Christ (Colossians 1.16), and that the goal is their reconciliation with God. Rather, the implication is that they are shown to be what they are – which is secondary and subservient to Jesus. While power language and talk of the Powers pervades the New Testament, therefore, the point overall is that they – and the means of power that they represent – are overcome. Greg Boyd observes: "Jesus's victory over the serpent and all other cosmic opponents pervades the New Testament. This much is evident simply because Psalm 110:1, which celebrates the victory of God's anointed one over his foes, is the most frequently alluded to passage in the New Testament, and it always applies to Jesus".[11]

At the same time, by the many instances of acknowledged injustice throughout the New Testament text, the biblical authors recognise that the final vindication of God's plan for creation is still to come. As the return of Christ is still anticipated (Revelation 22.12), we live

in a world where power is clearly not fully redeemed – where the Powers are not fully overcome.

What does all this mean for our understanding of the relationship between power and injustice? There are three points to make.

First, we can continue to affirm that power itself is not inherently negative. *Arche* is frequently translated as "the beginning", from which a figurative meaning of "foremost" or "preeminent" comes; *kyriotētes* is translated lordship (and even, in KJV translation of 2 Peter 1.10, as "government") as well as divine or angelic lordship or hierarchy; and *thronoi* is literally "thrones" and therefore metonymically, royal or official power.

However, secondly, power is judged to the extent that it opposes, usurps or stands against the power revealed in Christ. Principalities, dominions and thrones appear to be elements and orders of creation, inherent rather than alien presences within it, which can be and often are captured by spiritual forces – whether beings, ideas or cultures – that are oriented against God's will and kingdom.

Third, there is a sense in which Jesus' triumph over the Powers is an ongoing task for his followers. They must live in the world with individuals and corporate lives that acknowledge Jesus as Lord, in spite of the ongoing *prima facie* power of the Powers. Indeed, much ink is spilt assuring early Christian communities that they can persevere in confidence of the cosmic victory of Jesus of these Powers.

In the final part of our theological discussion below, we consider this relationship between Jesus' earthly mission and our ongoing treatment of power in more detail.

6

Parables about Power

If power, generically understood, is the capacity to fulfil a goal, what might the theological narrative outlined above teach us about how we should seek to achieve our goals in practice? The New Testament is full of stories (both fictional and historical) which imaginatively unpack this challenge, giving a clearer understanding of the moral implications of the Gospel message in the present day.

In line with the Hebrew Scriptures' account of God generously delegating power, establishing frameworks of order in both heavenly and earthly realms, it is first worth noting that the New Testament is generally respectful of human institutions and leadership. As above, power is not inherently negative – nor are institutions themselves a sign of corrupted power. On the contrary, they can be effective means of ordering and specialising resources, amplifying gifts, and preserving structures of accountability and support. This applies equally in secular and Church settings, and confirms that the New Testament's primary concern is not (in the first instance) *subverting outward power* as much as seeing communities formed into the likeness of Christ when it comes to attitudes and practices of power. Thus, Paul encourages Christians to "be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work" (Titus 3.1), and to "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13.1-4). Meanwhile, in Hebrews 13.17, we are instructed to, "Obey [our Church] leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." If power is a gift from God, Christians are exhorted to uphold (and

take on roles as) good leaders, and in good institutions, wherever they can – to work with power, rather than opposing it on principle.

Most famously of all, Jesus instructs the Pharisees and Herodians to "Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12.17), affirming Caesar's right to collect taxes alongside God's ultimate demand over the soul. So too, he encourages those of us who do find ourselves with more significant worldly power (whether status, money, high office or natural skill) to deploy this resource wisely, though fairly, in vignettes such as the Parable of Rich Fool and the Parable of Talents (Luke 12.16-21, Matthew 25.14-30). In short, the New Testament is not opposed to ordered leadership or the careful deployment of power and resources per se. On the contrary, it sees a helpful role for hierarchy, institutional power, and human authority – just as we are encouraged to view our own resources as gifts rather than embarrassments.

Therefore, Christians can think positively about power and engage in practices such as broad-based community organising – which explicitly aims at building power – with theological confidence. The New Testament explicitly affirms the need for power to effect change, but also recognises that such power must be 'relational' (power with rather than power over). Power generally works best when shared, allowing each individual in the collective to unlock their own powerful gift, albeit while allowing for certain individuals to take on specific tasks for which they are particularly well-suited.

However, there are four caveats to this general approach.

First, while the New Testament observes spiritual power manifesting in human institutions and individuals, it is uncompromising in its insistence that the power itself ultimately comes from God. Recognition of our ultimate dependence on God is strictly to be upheld. Indeed, Jesus directs praise away even from himself ("Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone") before giving his famous instruction to the rich young man to give away his wealth (Mark 10.17-31). We subsequently hear how Jesus "looking at [the man], loved him", indicating his deep concern for the man's soul – and by immediately directing praise away from himself in the exchange, we might tentatively imagine what he found in the man's soul was not only a disproportionate love of money, but a deeper tendency to flatter virtue, status, charisma, and power on earth, rather than directing praise back to the Divine. Similarly, in the majority of parables where a strong or powerful character is portrayed, it usually symbolises the role of God in the narrative (Matthew 18.21-35, Luke 7.40-47, Luke 12.35-48).

Second, regardless of whatever ontological position we adopt on the issue of the Powers – briefly discussed above – it is clear that individuals and institutions alike are vulnerable, on an ongoing basis, to distortion and subversion, and that there will be an ongoing oppositional element in Christian thinking and practice of power. The New Testament insistence that "Jesus is Lord" is nothing if not statement about legitimate exercise of power. The abuses of power mentioned in the introduction are all examples of how institutions can be used to cover up or protect human failing, including deliberate desire to harm.

Clearly, therefore, human power is not beyond reproach. While power can be positive, and institutions can be healthy, not all

worldly power is righteous or rightly ordered. Where power is wrongly attributed, or pride gets in the way of compassion, the New Testament has plenty to say about it. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is highly critical of the powerful leaders of his day where they are seen to exhibit pride, hypocrisy, and lack of compassion – that is, where they do not steward their own power and resources well, using them for self-aggrandisement rather than God's aims (see esp. Matthew 23.1-12, but also Mark 11.15-19, Mark 7.6, Luke 20.46-47). And by way of a practical historic example, Paul (successfully) insists on his right to be tried by the Emperor rather than the local Governor in Acts 25. This incident models the dignified challenge of abuses of power, and the witness against inappropriate forms of power – especially, a lack of transparency. This requires constant and prayerful attention, to uncover and accuse misuse of power from a position of humility.

Finally, and as a result of the above, when it comes to the self-emptying submission modelled by Christ, the New Testament is clear that this is not just a theological principle, but practice relevant for Christians. Thus, Jesus' response to his disciples questioning who was greatest among them is clear: "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9.33-37). Likewise, he is clear that it is not enough to *claim* faith in him – or indeed, even to wield "power" in his name – while failing to reckon with the full implications of his commandments as a whole (Matthew 7.21-23). Rather, there must be a genuine alignment of will to be greatest in the eyes of Heaven. This means seeking God's will for his power, and consequently, the willingness to do what God demands at any cost (Matthew 16.24-26, 1 Peter 2.16). Of course, reconciling this submissive posture with the

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careful stewardship of resources and talents is a challenge – but one which will ultimately be resolved only through prayer, as the means by which we understand God's own intentions for the gifts he has given us. As above, true power is perfected in submission to God's will.

Taking these principles together, the New Testament view of power is by no means apolitical; the early Christian authors do not argue that Christians should not engage with political or institutional issues at all. However, the tactics endorsed for bringing about real change may be at odds from those viewed as most obviously sensible or strong in the secular world. In particular, many of Christ's parables seem to valorise a slow and steady (or 'small is mighty') view of true power: as in the Parable of the Unjust Judge, or the Parable of Persistent Friend, persistence (even of the powerless) has a force of its own. So too, descriptions of the Kingdom of God as a seed, or yeast indicate the ways in which spiritual power can start small but bring about a wholesale, systemic, and even ontological change over time.

6

Conclusion

Those who want to think theologically about power can be encouraged by the way the Bible takes their questions seriously. These themes are present in the whole Bible. The way this gift of God to human and other spiritual agents is exercised in both good and bad ways, and how God acts to restore right relations, is arguably the very substance of salvation history.

In conclusion, we will make two points.

The first is to reiterate that a theology of power cannot be controlled by the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' set out in the introduction. This is not to suggest that particular institutions should not be subjected to a profound and far reaching critique of a dehumanizing exercise of their power or authority. Rather, if the exercise of power is part of what it is to be human, then the whole question must be addressed within the context of the vocation to bear the image of God, to steward creation, and to love neighbour. The message is not, "power is bad". The message is, "power is given for a purpose, and will be judged". As the Apostle Paul witnessed "about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" during his trial to the Roman governor Felix, we read that "Felix was afraid…" (Acts 24.25). Indeed, power is judged according to the power seen at work in the cross and the resurrection.

This leads us to our second and final point. The authors and readers of this document occupy a social, economic and political position unlike the early Christian communities. Comparatively, we wield significant social, economic and political power (though our communities may, interestingly, yearn for the spiritual authority exercised by 'weaker' sisters and brothers). We must wield – not

yield – our power in light of the reality of "righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come".

Endnotes

1 Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 11.

2 Psalm 8.3-9.

3 Crouch, *Playing God*, 10. [Emphasis ours]

4 Isaiah 24.21-23.

5 Luke 1.51-52.

6 For more directly 'political' readings of the Gospels, see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008); John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 2009); Bruce Mailina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); or NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 2012). Of course, each of these authors would differ quite radically on what 'reading Jesus politically' would entail, while agreeing that it is a necessary endeavour.

7 2 Corinthians 12.7-10.

8 Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 5. See also Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1992).

9 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, pp. 7-9.

10 Colossians 2:15.

11 Greg Boyd in James Beilby. Understanding Spiritual Warfare (Baker Publishing Group: Kindle Edition), p. 137

A Theology of Power

From personal relationships to politics, what we think about power (and how much of it we have) profoundly shapes our understanding and experience of the world around us. Today, many have an instinctive suspicion of 'powerful' elites, yet we also live in an age of strongman leadership on the global stage. Competing understandings of power have become a defining characteristic of our historical moment.

This essay unpacks what the Bible says about power. For the biblical authors, power is fundamentally creative, God-given, and indeed pervasive. Yet humans too often subvert its positive potential to dominate others. Power in the biblical understanding is both vital and dangerous; a gift and a risk.

This theological approach to power offers a compelling corrective both to those who abuse power for domination, and those who deny its potential for good altogether.

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