



The Direction of Power

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1st Corinthians 4:1-13

Power... so much of what goes on in this world has to do with power and struggling against others. We use power and influence to make us feel comfortable and secure. We use power to raise our status, to put others down, and at times to help others. We often make decisions based on our concerns with power and control. When we feel limited, we seek control by circumventing power structures to accomplish our will in conflict with that of others.

Of all people, Jesus should have been the most powerful. He had access to God's unlimited resources. The apostles ran a close second in their ministries, as did some of the prophets of old. In the practice of living, however, they did not wield power to control others. Their lives and ministries took a very different tack. Peter, Paul, Jesus, Elijah, and Elisha ran very much counter to our standard relationship to power and influence. How can we find appropriate direction for our ministries and lives following the directions of gospel faith, rather than the models of our society?

The Corinthian church was in shambles. Its various factions were vying for control and status. They wanted to use their rising social status for personal benefit. Corinth had only recently become a player in the political arena of the Roman Empire. People who had not been citizens of the Empire had recently come to a new status. There was a good deal of economic growth and many had risen in both social and economic spheres. Their recent rise in status and power brought overtones of social practice into the life of the church.

As they had thrown off shackles of Roman oppression, many were transformed into a new wave of oppressors. Newly discovered opportunity shifted the balance of power and they readily began using newly acquired power according to the models they had known all their lives. Their new freedom became an opportunity to wield power as a weapon that had once been unavailable to them. The oppressed became part of the system of oppression.

Such is the norm in human interaction. We learn from the systems we see, without reflecting enough to keep us from transforming the system before us. We miss that the gospel of Christ Jesus would transform us not from oppressed into oppressors, but into victors beyond the reach of the power structures we have ever known. It would take us into a wholly new reality of existence and interaction based on grace instead of force.

That concept is implicit in Paul's simple statement that stewards are expected to be trustworthy. As believers, we were never to be sucked into quests for power. After all, the gospel is not about the force and coercion. It is not about exerting influence upon others to mold them to our wills. Rather, we are to be stewards, God's servants molded by Christ Jesus into ministers of God's will, not our own. As such, we must break free from the patterns around us and how others wield power and force.

Paul talked about the examples before Corinth. He called believers to use a new perspective, recognizing their apostles as servants, not masters who wield power and influence for personal gain and advancement. They had used their influence and example to serve God's interests and priorities. They left examples of the new life in Christ with its altogether distinctive categories of action and purpose.

The selflessness of purpose in their examples should have translated into new patterns of action within the church. Paul and Apollo had focused on their service to Christ Jesus and their stewardship of

the gospel. This should likewise have been the purpose of the church. Purpose and intent are difficult things to judge, however. Paul therefore leaves such judgment to God. At the same time, a purpose consistent with the gospel should give evidence of a shift in the focus of one's life and actions. Ultimate judgment belongs to God alone, yet we are charged with responsibility for those same purposes.

A steward serving properly will not worry so much about personal standing or status. The direction of one's ministry is front and center. The quality of one's actions in carrying out God's plans is what matters. This was visible in the lives of Paul and Apollo. They had acted in accord with Christ's claim on their lives. They had nothing; they held onto nothing which was not a gift from God. They used their all to serve, not to build up themselves. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of the church.

While Paul and Apollo modeled selfless ministry before the Corinthians, the Corinthians manipulated the gospel to fashion status for themselves. They acted as though they were kings, consumed with issues of self-importance. Nothing could be much further from the gospel of Christ Jesus. The gospel is that while we are nothing, Christ Jesus is all. While we are yet nothing, God loves us and grants us reconciliation with God. This is not based on our qualities at all. It is not based on any issues of self-importance. On the contrary, it is all about God's grace in accepting us in spite of ourselves and our lack of worth.

If we come to the gospel of Christ as persons unworthy of God's love, what gives us any right to boast of our participation in the gospel? Are we suddenly better or more important than others because of God's grace? By no means! The gospel is not that we are any better or more worthy than any other. We have simply accepted God's loving grace in spite of our unworthiness.

The Corinthian church was divided in part over which leader each faction claimed to follow. Each one claimed greater importance than the rest. They ignored that each faction cast themselves as more important than the founding leaders after whom they named themselves.

They claimed strength, position, worth, status, and power, yet their leaders had ministered before them as weak, poor, and dependent solely on God's grace. The church acted according to definitions of self-importance, while the examples before them modeled a very different way of living. The gospel demands a different way. It is not the way of power and self-importance. It is not the way of force and coercion, but of selfless service.

While the church continued to reflect self-centered attitudes of self-promotion, they missed the very message of the gospel they claimed. They missed that the gospel by definition determined that no one is worthy. They missed the identity of the gospel's very power. It was never about our worth. It was always about God's worth, about God's love, about God's grace. When we struggle to define distinctions between our individual statuses, we miss the point of grace.

How long will we wrestle with these same issues of power and control and self-importance? How long will we struggle with demanding our own way? How long will we attempt to define our standing by casting others as our inferiors?

At the end of the day, the gospel is not about me and my worth. It is not about you and yours. It is about the supremacy of Christ Jesus who showed us the power of living in selfless service to God and on behalf of others. When will we pattern the direction of our lives after Jesus' relation to power? The power of the gospel would transform our lives in love. Power otherwise simply discredits God's grace.

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