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### God's Power for the Believer

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**GOD'S POWER FOR THE BELIEVER**

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**A Seminar Paper Submitted to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Doctrinal Theology  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Sacred Theology**

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**By**

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**April 2001**

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## Introduction

It is possible that this generation has witnessed more controversy over the purpose, use, and manifestation of God's power than any other in church history. There is one continuum of views that has at one end those who believe that God does not manifest His power in any way other than salvation, and, at the other end, those who think His power is so self-controlled by the believer that it can be manipulated. In addition to this continuum, the liberation theologians represent a second continuum. This continuum fails to allow God to be the "wholly other" spiritual power over creation and the forces of evil. Liberation theology's continuum consists of human initiative for social and political progress of the underprivileged at one end and the lack thereof at the other, all of which negates the spiritual influence of God's power upon the material world. It also fails to acknowledge both God's sovereignty over the world and the spiritual struggle believer's have with evil demonic forces.

So the questions that will be examined in this paper include the following. Does God manifest His power in any way other than salvation, either through miracles to bring people to salvation or to bless those who are already saved? What is the purpose of God showing His power? What is the connection between God's power and faith and between His power and His righteousness? And finally, how does a biblical theology of God's power give an answer to those who demythologize His power into a social program? These and other questions are very much on the minds of Christians as they search for biblical answers to apply to their own lives. As these questions are answered throughout this paper, they will be answered in reference to these two continuums mentioned above



in order to how the believer should live in the middle of the first continuum and that the second continuum, by virtue of the first being correct, is ruled out completely.

The primary task of this paper is to gain an accurate biblical theology of God's power. Whereas this will not be comprehensive in analyzing all of the biblical teachings on God's power, it will undertake to include the major themes. In particular, a theology of God's power will be developed especially (but not exclusively) from the Psalms and the writings of Paul. Both writings deal with the themes of creation, the relationship between God's power over creation and His involvement with it, God's power demonstrated in salvation, and the believer's position as participant in the manifestations of God's power. Both of these writings also position God's power squarely within the parameters of God's salvation. In both cases, those who refuse to accept God's grace and favor receive the negative results of God's power and those who do accept God's grace and favor receive the positive results of God's power. However, both negative and positive results stem from the person's relationship to God's salvation.

Due to the wide scope of the theological material in each of these writings and in how they weave together these themes mentioned above, for this paper, it will be sufficient to look at these two writings in detail to show the proper biblical relationship between God's power and the believer. It will be evident that a more comprehensive study would include a more complete examination of the biblical material and the philosophical presuppositions that determine how one views God's power in relationship to the world and the believer. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, these other concerns must wait for further development.

From the biblical material presented, the position of the believer in the middle of the first continuum mentioned above will be posited. The error of each end of the first continuum mentioned above and the discounting of God's supernatural power altogether as in the second continuum will also be shown. Once an understanding of God's power is gained from this biblical perspective, then one can see more clearly the purpose of God's power to and through His church and also be able to properly understand the believer's position and role in their daily participation with God's power.

Ultimately, God's power must be examined in its relationship to the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ as demonstrated by God raising Christ from the dead. It is this one event, particularly crucial for Paul, which encapsulates the purpose of the demonstration of God's power to the world, the church, and to the believer's life. Without this christologically-centered framework, God's power demonstrated throughout Scripture becomes both empty of God's intended purpose and more controlled by the believer than by God Himself, although, at this point it ceases to be God's power even though it is still referred to as such. This will all be seen in clearer detail in the following investigation into the biblical concept of God's power as described by Psalms and by Paul.

## **I. A Biblical Theology of God's Power.**

### **A. God's Power in Psalms**

In order to set an Old Testament foundation, upon which God's power in Psalms is based, the key Hebrew terms must be identified. One of the key Hebrew terms is **גְּבוּרָה**, translated as 'force', 'might', 'power', or 'strength'. David declared, "Thine, O LORD is the greatness (**גְּדֻלָּהּ**), and the power (**גְּבוּרָה**), and the glory (**תְּפִאֲרוֹת**), and the

victory (נצח), and the majesty (הוד) : for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou are exalted as head above all.” (1 Chronicles 29:11). In this context power is another human term, among others, used to try to explain what is humanly unexplainable. Moses uses two other terms in his song of God’s victory over Egypt at the Red Sea. Moses says, “Thy right hand (ימינך), O LORD, is become glorious in power (כח): thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.” (Ex. 15:6). Habakkuk uses yet another term to describe God’s power, “And his brightness was as the light; he had horns coming out of his hand; and there was the hiding of his power (על). These key Hebrew terms used to refer to God’s power elsewhere in the Old Testament are also found in abundance in the Psalms.

Throughout Psalms it is significant that God’s power is both a distinct and unique power completely separate from creation but yet involved intimately with that creation to display His eternal purpose of salvation. In relation to the two proposed continuums, God’s power in Psalms is not so remote as to be detached from His love for humanity thus being uninvolved in humanity’s struggles. Neither is His power able to be detached from His sovereignty over creation to the point that it is one with humanity and able to be manipulated. God’s power remains in God alone to fulfill His plan of redemption. Psalms also shows the errors of liberation theology by demonstrating God’s power as distinct from human initiative, even though God directs and wills the human initiative to carry out the social and political maneuvers that are necessary to fulfill His eternal plan of redemption.



While the Psalms do exhibit a plethora of human emotions that call upon God to use His power in varied ways, a common thread can be seen running throughout by the way God's power is anything but arbitrary or unjust. Rather, in the following selected Psalms, God's power is shown to demonstrate a unified theme of God's sacrificial love for humanity that reaches humans in their weakness and sin and allows them to participate in the cosmic chorus of the universal confession of faith. This is shown by how God's power is continually interwoven with the other themes of creation, human's inability to help themselves, God's offer of salvation to helpless humans, and the willing participation of human's with God's power. However, this human participation is to also serve God's plan of redemption, to bring about the same proclamation of good news so that others might too be recipients of God's grace.

One particular Psalm in which God's power is interwoven with salvation and faith is Psalm 21. Here the Psalmist speaks of Yahweh's strength (עֹז v. 1) and power or might (גְּבוּרָה<sup>1</sup> from גָּבַר<sup>2</sup>) in the context of salvation (יְשׁוּעָה) and all its accompanying blessings (vs. 2-4). This salvation also brings splendor, majesty, joy, and gladness (vs. 5,6) for the king has put his trust (בַּטָּח, full confidence) in Yahweh and in the steadfast love (חֶסֶד) of the Most High<sup>3</sup> (God) he will not be shaken. Not only is the Lord's power manifested in positive results of His salvation, His power also manifests very negative results for those who are his enemies. These enemies hate Yahweh and

<sup>1</sup> Also in Ps. 20:6 (7), "Now I know the LORD saves his anointed; He answers him from his holy heaven with helping strength of his right hand" (יְצַנְהוּ מִשָּׁמַי קֹדֶשׁוֹ בְּגִבּוֹרוֹת יֵשַׁע יְמִינֹו).

<sup>2</sup> Qal = excel, accomplish; Hif = be strong. William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 54.

devise evil plots against him, but their plots will not succeed (21:11), they will be swallowed up by God's wrath, and the fire will destroy them (21:9). Both the glories of salvation through Yahweh's steadfast love to those who trust Him and the destruction by His wrath of those who hate Him are sandwiched between David's rejoicing and praising of Yahweh's power and strength in vs. 1-7 and 13. David's confession of faith in God is seen in v.13 where he desired God to be exalted in His strength. He declares that "We will sing and praise Your power."

Yahweh is the stronghold or refuge (בְּצִלְתָּו Ps. 59:9,17) who meets His children with his steadfast love (59:10). Here too, it is in the context of God's steadfast love that his power (גִּבּוֹרָתוֹ)<sup>4</sup> is sought to scatter the enemy and bring them down (59:11). This strength of God brings rejoicing and thanksgiving, not in the physical results or even in an inward satisfaction of revenge, but in the showing forth of the strength of God as it relates to his steadfast love. In these two verses (59:16-17), David leaves behind the thoughts of the enemies (but as for me) and joyfully praises God for His strength and steadfast love and for being a stronghold and refuge in times of distress. So even though God's power and strength are closely related to His eventual victory over His enemies, the main focus of praise is not what God does to the enemies but the saving and keeping power of God for the believer against the enemies. This is what truly makes God's power worthy of praise. God is worthy of praise even in the midst of difficulty, where God's sovereign power is not readily identifiable or manifested in an outward form of

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<sup>3</sup> אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ is a designation for God, the Most High, sometimes compounded with *el* for Most High God (Gn. 14:18-20, identified with Yahweh in Gn. 14:22), formed by the adjective 'אֵל meaning 'upper'. Holladay, 274.

power. The psalmist leaves a tension between God's sovereign power, which has already subdued His enemies and His toleration of the enemies by not yet putting the vanquished foes on public display.

In Ps. 62, God's power and steadfast love are together in adjoining lines (v. 11 עֹז לַאֱלֹהִים 'power belongs to God' and v. 12 וְלִי־אֶדְנִי חֲסֵד 'and steadfast love is yours, O Lord'). This coupling also concludes a Psalm where God's ultimate justice and already achieved superiority are held in tension in a hope for salvation (vs. 5-6) and a present assurance of God's refuge and strength (v. 2). And again in Psalm 63:3-4, David beholds God's glory and power in the sanctuary where the acknowledgement of God's steadfast love brings praise to his lips and the raising of his hands.

### 1. God's Power Demonstrated In and Over Creation

God's power is closely connected to His mighty deeds in creation and in the historical events of Israel in Psalm 66. Here also God's power is connected with His being far above the world and watching over all the nations (66:7). For Israel, there was no revelation of Yahweh's character apart from His demonstration of power through the historical acts in their nation's history and in His use of nature. It is to their own history that their faith is related. As Hans-Joachim Kraus explains:

Israel 'remembers' Yahweh's great deeds, which in this remembrance becomes present reality. God's history is the basis, to which faith is related, the present basis of existence on which the people of God stand. This is thus not a concern for 'history' as such, but for the history of God, for Yahweh in the history of his acts.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Used for both military strength and monetary wealth. Its root noun חָזַק 'strong' or 'firm' is used for God's ways being firm (Ps. 10:5). Gleason Archer, R. Laird Harris, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) vol. 1, 271.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 60.



God's power then is not an abstract power that can be manipulated or bargained for through any human effort, but rather is a unique power that is above and distinct from the material world yet demonstrated by God's acts within the material world. This quality of God's power over creation is what gives Him the greatest distinction from creation. As Jeremiah points out, "But God made the earth by his power (אֱלֹהִים)<sup>6</sup>; he founded the world in wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding" (Jer. 10:12). In comparison to God's wisdom demonstrated through His power, "Everyone is senseless and without knowledge" (10:14).

The psalter also relates Yahweh's power over Israel and the nations with His creative power over the universe. The creator is not simply a nameless or unidentifiable power, but is the Creator who has revealed Himself in the history of Israel's election and salvation. Psalm 89, for instance, makes the connection between Yahweh's activities in creation and His purpose of redeeming fallen creation. The LORD who founded the heavens and the world and all it contains (89:11) has righteousness and justice as a foundation to His throne (v.14). By His righteousness His people are exalted (v. 16), God is the glory of their strength (v. 17), and their shield belongs to the LORD (v. 18). This clearly demonstrates a soteriological connection between God's acts of creation, His righteousness, His plan of redeeming humanity, and His ongoing protection of those who confess Him as LORD. This same soteriological connection will be seen later in Paul's writings when he relates God's power with His righteousness and faith in salvation.

Hans-Joachim Kraus shows not only the connection of Yahweh's historical acts with His creation, but that Yahweh had no need of demonstrating superiority over the

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<sup>6</sup> This word is used of both God and humans, but the usage shows God's infinite power in creation (Jer. 32:17) in contrast to the futile and finite power of humans (Ps. 33:16, Zech. 4:6, in comparison to God's

primeval chaos through a struggle for domination such as was the case with Israel's neighbors' gods. "As is true of the history of his saving deeds of power, Yahweh's conquest of His foes is a sovereign event, only recently concluded, to which one now looks back."<sup>7</sup> It is this lordship over creation that gives His acts in Israel's history their most significant understanding.

Kraus explains:

Only the lordship which Yahweh exercises in sovereignty and freedom is able to illuminate the reality of creation as it is found in the Old Testament, including the Psalms. This means, however, that only the encounter with Yahweh the Lord in the history of his acts can give us a proper perspective on the presupposition that is determinative for the biblical statements about the creator: He does not belong to the world, and he does not stand alongside the world in an ontological context that encompasses both him and it. He is its Lord. By this token the world is "world." Thus in the biblical meaning of the concept, creation does not imply a being and becoming with its own conditions for existence. The world – heaven and earth – have their reality only because of the unique activity and work of Yahweh (Ps. 65:6; 78:69). The belief that creation is an expression of God's grace, that in it the creator provides food as a father provides for his household (Ps. 104:27-28; 145:15-16), means that no one can lay claim to anything as a right.<sup>8</sup>

This has major implications for how Psalms positions the believer in connection to God's power. First, God is shown to be involved with Israel (and through Israel to the entire world) in a unique way, which bound them to Himself so that their history was His story. They could not either escape His right hand of power at one end of the continuum nor manipulate it at the other. They could only submit to His plan for their history or rebel and submit anyway, but in a way which was most unpleasant. Second, God is shown to be ontologically 'other' than Israel and the rest of His creation in a way which prohibited their denying or ignoring His power in hopes they might achieve their own

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Spirit).

<sup>7</sup> Kraus, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 65.



political or social agenda. In order to combat this tendency God, in His steadfast love, refused to let Israel go, but remained involved by showing His power even if by wrath through Israel's enemies.

## **2. God's Power Over His Enemies**

Another important aspect in identifying the nature of a biblical theology of God's power is seeing how His power is discussed in Psalms in relation to the enemies of Israel and the individual. For it is within this context, and as demonstrated in creation and in Israel's history, that God reveals not only the nature of His power but also the eternal purpose of His power. Not only do nations and individuals represent the enemies of God in Psalms, but they also designate more than just earthly foes of flesh and blood and of earthly kingdoms. As will be seen, the evil behind the enemies and their defiance of God's intervention points to a demonic force, which challenges God's power.

In identifying the nature of God's power in relation to his enemies in the Psalms one must ask some basic questions. What constitutes the psalter's plea to God for Israel and for himself? How does he expect God to use His power? When does the psalter expect the power to be unleashed? These are important questions, not only in a study of the power of God in Psalms but they will be equally important later as we turn our attention to the New Testament's teaching of God's power for the modern day believer.

Yahweh's power is solicited not only beyond the temporal dimension of Israel's history but beyond the physical dimension of Israel and its people as well. The physical battle of the powers is played out in all of creation with the expectation that God will use His power to vindicate Himself by bringing all the threatening elements of nature under complete subjection of His dominion. This superiority of Yahweh's power is further

demonstrated by the contrast of His already won victory over all other gods and powers (with no mention of any struggle) compared to the gods of neighboring nations who found it necessary to “win” their power in a cosmic battle. However, the primeval chaos continues to manifest itself against the power of Yahweh by threatening His creation with destruction. “The floods roared, O Yahweh; the floods roared with their thunderous voice; the floods roared with their pounding.”<sup>9</sup> (Ps. 93:3). “But greater than the roar of many waters, . . . was the Mighty One on high, O Yahweh (93:4). Yahweh’s superiority over all other forces is a past event, even though the floods continue to roar. The poetic imagery used here is the means by which Israel reenacts the victory of Yahweh in their proclaiming Him as King. By the use of this imagery in their liturgy God’s great power is acknowledged as present reality and alive with future possibilities. A. Weiser describes the importance of Israel’s worship including the acknowledgement of God’s power at work as a present reality:

He is the God who was, who is and who is to come, and before whose reality the barriers of time disappear so that what happened long ago and what will come to pass in the future both simultaneously call for a decision at the present moment. The eye of faith, focused on the reality of God, is opened to a living understanding [sic] of reality by means of which pre-history and the end of time, creation and eschatology, acquire an actuality that is charged with energy and is concentrated on the present by the very fact that God shows himself at work in it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, edited by Ralph P. Martin, Vol. 20 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, Gen. Eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 480. The imperfect form of the third usage נִשְׁעַר is sometimes changed to the perfect, but the continuation of the past tense in Ugaritic and Hebrew poetry seems to be well established. “Nevertheless, the cosmogonic victory of Yahweh should not be treated as a purely past event. The context of acclamation indicates a continuing threat: Why the acclamation of Yahweh as the Victor King if the ‘floods’ have long ceased to be a problem?”

<sup>10</sup> A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. by H. Hartwell, *Das Alte Testament Deutsch* 14/15 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Old Testament Library, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 618, quoted in Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, edited by Ralph P. Martin, Vol. 20 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, Gen. Eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 481.



Already present within Israel's worship is the realization that God's power calls for and is an intricate part of the believer's faith and life, both the faith given by God for salvation and the resulting faith one lives by subsequent to salvation. The power of God then can neither be confined to the act of salvation, but rather produces a living faith that is acknowledged every day as the source of strength the believer lives by. This confession of God's power operational in the believer's life must not necessarily produce great signs and wonders, but is both the realization as the source of daily faith necessary for the continual walk in the Spirit and the awareness that great signs and wonders are indeed possible. In short, God's power demands the believer's acknowledgement of and submission to His power, in whatever way He uses His power to affect the believer's life. The main point being, the confession of that faith within the community and before the world. This confession then becomes the testimony to God's enemies of the believer's true source of power, a power source that is totally absent of human initiative and manipulation. These evil forces then might come against the faithful of God, but the confession of faith reveals the true Victor.

The same power that formed the heavens and the world and performed mighty acts in Israel's history are called upon by the psalter to destroy the enemies of Yahweh. These enemies (Ps. 18:17,40,48), haters and adversaries of God (Ps. 89:23), and kings of the earth and rulers (Ps. 2:2) have all taken their stand against God, His people, and His anointed. These enemies have been used to carry out God's judgment on Israel herself when His people have rebelled to the point of deserved punishment (Ps. 129:1-2), but when coming against God's people they are, in fact, coming against God Himself (Ps. 83:1-5). In light of this, the psalter wonders how long God will withdraw His right hand

of power (יְמִינֶיךָ)<sup>11</sup> from destroying the enemies who spurn His name forever (Ps. 74:10-11). It is in the midst of this expectation of future deliverance that the psalmist pleads for the Lord to arise or be exalted (וַיִּשָׁאֵר Ps. 21:13; 74:22). However, this use of God's power is called upon for the purpose of God vindicating His own name rather than the selfish interests of His people.

It is just this very aspect of Israel's enemies spurning the name of Yahweh forever (Ps. 74:10) that gives the exaltation of God more than just a temporal and physical dimension. Not only do the enemies of God despise His name, they take on demonic qualities in the search for people to destroy. It is more than the physical body of the saints the enemy desires to kill. The enemy of the individual is the doer of evil (כָּל-פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן) 'all doers of evil', Ps. 94:4), which is contrasted sharply with the ones they persecute, harass, and threaten; the innocent and the righteous (צַדִּיק Ps. 94:21). It is here that the enemy of the individual is seen as a dark and demonic foe of the righteous.

The power of God working His ultimate purpose of salvation through His people, sanctuary, and individuals (who have submitted by faith to His purpose) is seen in two institutions within Israel's worship. It was the two institutions of hearing judicial cases in the city gates and the cleansing of the sick in the sanctuary that bring into sharp focus the

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<sup>11</sup> This can refer to the physical right hand, eye, side, etc., but the more important usage is "the figurative expression 'the right hand of the Lord' which exhibits the omnipotence of God especially on behalf of his people Israel. One of the earliest and most explicit statements is that found in Moses' song of triumph after they had crossed the Red Sea and the Egyptian army had been destroyed. In Ex 15:6 he claims, 'Thy right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power; Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.' . . . Hence, the almighty power of God is pictured by his right hand as an instrument for delivering his people from their enemies. Harris, Archer, Waltke, eds., Vol. 1, 382.



exact nature of Yahweh's enemies and the means by which God protects His people with His power.

Kraus draws the analogy (relying on H. Schmidt and W. Beyerlin) between the accusers having to submit their accusations to divine judgment in the city gates (or if a split decision was rendered then it would go to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem (Deut 17:8-13)) and of the doers of evil attempting to kill the righteous before they could get to the protection of the sanctuary (Ps. 57; 63). It was in the sanctuary where one would find protection under the shadow of God's wings until the threat passed. The evil powers then are ones that attempt to destroy the righteousness of their victim by slanderous lies in order to see the righteous condemned. All of these features give the hostile powers "a decidedly demonic character. The one who belongs to God, who relies on God, is to be destroyed. The murderous impulse threatens the servant of God, the one who is weak and poor."<sup>12</sup>

The analogy is also drawn between the purification rites for those who were sick and the evil powers pursuing the ones they attempt to condemn. The common view of a causal relationship between sickness and guilt made an easy target of accusations and slander against the sick by those who thought it was a well-deserved punishment. Ps. 38 is an example of how easily one can link God's wrath and punishment to physical and material problems of life. David says to the LORD, "For your arrows have sunk deep into me and your hand has pressed down on me (Ps. 38:2, LXX - ὅτι τὰ βέλη σου ἐνεπάγησάν<sup>13</sup> μοι καὶ ἐπεστήρισας<sup>14</sup> ἐπ' ἐμὲ τὴν χειρὰ σου). He then looks at his

<sup>12</sup> Kraus, 132.

<sup>13</sup> LXX uses πηγυμι, 'make firm' or 'fix', here for ἵκν, 'descend'.

<sup>14</sup> LXX uses στηρίζω, 'fix' or 'establish', here for the ἵκν, 'descend'.

sins for the reason for his failing health (v. 3), sees his friends standing aloof (v. 11), and his enemies who have sought to injure his life (v. 12). However, in all of this, he does not open his mouth and is like one who is deaf (v. 13-14), hoping in Yahweh for an answer (v. 15). Rather than seeking God for personal vindication, David confesses his own sin (v. 18) and realizes his enemies hate him because he follows what is good (v. 20). His plea after all of this is simply for Yahweh, who is his salvation, to quickly help him (v. 22).

So, even though the purpose of the enemies of God is to separate the believer from God by their slander, David does not fall victim to this temptation. Rather than taking God's power "into his own hands" or claiming God's guidance and protection when using his own sword against his enemies, he falls on God's power to deliver him. Therefore, God is seen as the one who exercises His own power to defeat the enemy in the spiritual and eternal realm.

There is no doubt, however, that the prayers in Psalms, which depict the work of the enemy even in a physical sense, are meant to overcome that enemy. The most significant aspect of David's prayer is not what he says but what his words imply. First, his prayer implies that his life is in the middle of the first continuum, for neither does he dismiss the spiritual aspects of the battle as merely 'the way things are' nor does he bargain with God by striking a deal. He simply, by faith, relinquishes his own right for revenge while acknowledging God's power as his source of vindication and help. Second, his prayer implies the existence of a real spiritual world with spiritual enemies, which can not be fought against with government, social, educational, or economic forces

carried out by human initiative. It is God's power alone that will win the battle, and a sure win it will be.

In all of this the believer trusts in God's power because His power is self-sufficient and self-vindicating. Whereas the believer's prayers are a necessary ingredient in God's power flowing through the believer's life, God's power is still shown to work in distinction to the believer's prayers in a way that prohibits the prayers to degenerate into manipulation. This is precisely why the psalmist relies upon God's power. The prayer is more of a personal acknowledgement to God of the believer's willing participation in what God has and is already doing rather than being seen as the believer's way of 'prodding' or manipulating God to use His power against His own purpose. Of course this begs the question of how does the believer's prayers come to bear upon how and when God uses His power to intervene on behalf of the believer's life. However, such a question is beyond the scope of this paper. Let it suffice here to say that God hears and acts upon the prayers of His people according to His will and purpose. The appropriation of His power into the situations of those who pray serves one and only purpose, that is to bring glory and honor to His name. Therefore, the use of His power can never contradict but must always integrate His other characteristics.

Not only are these hostile powers seen as an assault on the individual from another individual, they have a transcendent element with "the intention to move beyond what is earthly and human and to give visibility to supernatural powers."<sup>15</sup> This is done by using the motif of the primeval powers derived by mythological language and incorporating it into Israel's foes in order to demonstrate the character of Yahweh's

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<sup>15</sup> Kraus, 134.



opponents who rise up against Him, His anointed, His people, and His purpose.<sup>16</sup> These powers are then seen as nothing less than the powers of Sheol and death itself, which have one goal, to separate from Yahweh those who put their trust in Him and cry out to Him for His strength. In that sense Martin Buber was right when he described the hostile powers as “not a human being or human powers, but the primeval tempter, the one who in history hinders redemption.”<sup>17</sup> The demonic nature of the hostile enemies of the believers mandates a life lived in the middle of the first continuum, the realization that God’s power is active in the daily confession of faith to continually subdue the enemy of the soul and that it must remain free from self-manipulation. It also mandates the realization that God’s power to subdue the demonic enemy of the soul has never and never will be confined to a social, political, or educational program represented by the second continuum of liberation theology. God does not share His glory with any other.

This larger context in which Kraus admonishes us to view these hostile powers warring against the believer’s soul is the context of the spiritual and the eternal, the sphere beyond the physical and the material. In this way, God’s power is always seen in connection with His righteousness, compassion, covenant, truth, justice, holiness, and redemption. “Splendid and majestic is His work; and His righteousness endures forever. He has made His wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate. He has sent redemption to His people; He has ordained His covenant forever; Holy and awesome is His name” (Ps. 111:3-4, 9). It is significant that these verses interconnect God’s power to His eternal purpose of redemption. Therefore, His power cannot be arbitrary or inconsistent with His divine nature. Neither can it be separated from the

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<sup>16</sup> Kraus, 134.

economy of salvation because salvation's plan for humanity is the extension of the divine nature reaching out towards fallen humanity. To summarize, since, in the Psalms, God's power for the individual cannot be separated from His work of salvation, neither should the individual separate God's power and give it a distinction void of its biblical context.

As these truths of God's power seen in Psalms are applied to the two continuums, it becomes more apparent that God's power does work dynamically and daily in the life of the believer, but distinct from any manipulation by the believer. Furthermore, the spiritual nature of God's power rules out the second continuum that consists only of human effort. God's power is salvific, redeeming, and eternal. This eternal purpose of God's power to demonstrate His redeeming love for lost humanity will come now into even clearer light in the writings of Paul.

#### **B. God's Power in Paul's Writings**

In an examination of the New Testament idea of power it will be helpful to first identify the key terms and how they are used. The two Greek words for power are  $\delta\upsilon\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$  and  $\epsilon\chi\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$ . When Paul wants to demonstrate God's creative and redemptive power over nature and the raising of Christ from the dead he uses  $\delta\upsilon\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$ . The other word Paul uses for power is  $\epsilon\chi\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$ , which has more the meaning of ability, force, freedom of choice, authority, or even power. Even though there is no hard and fast rule separating these two, generally  $\delta\upsilon\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$  is an inherent power of God whereas  $\epsilon\chi\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$  is a borrowed authority originating in God himself. For example, the powers of Rom. 13:1-3, which speak of governmental powers, are  $\epsilon\chi\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$ , but the power that

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, "Offener Brief an G. Kittel." *In Versuche Des Verstehens*, Edited by R. R. Geis and H. L. Kraus (Munich: Kaiser, 1966), 169, quoted in Kraus, 135.

God demonstrated by the raising up of Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17) and to make His power known (Rom. 9:22) are both His own *δυναμις*.

In the life and ministry of Jesus this distinction between the two terms is not so apparent. After commanding the demon to leave the man in the synagogue, the people acknowledged in Jesus both authority, *εξουσια*, and power, *δυναμις*, for Him to have this control over the demon world (Lk. 4:36). Here the two are so closely connected in the same person and act they mostly overlap in meaning. However, to Luke, it was important to show that Jesus possessed both. The point of this distinction that concerns the present study is the delegation of God's *δυναμις* for the purpose of humans possessing *εξουσια*. Jesus surely did possess both power and authority, but, when He ascended into heaven, where did he leave His power to reside?

### **1. God's Power Revealed in the Gospel**

It is of great significance that Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is quick to identify the power of God in correlation to His salvation and revealed righteousness with the same correlation as was seen in the Psalms. He says, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power (*δυναμις*) of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY FAITH" (Rom. 1:16-17). Here Paul identifies God's power for salvation with the Gospel itself. There is no other power for salvation outside the declaration of the Gospel. But if God's power for salvation resides in the Gospel, a proper definition of Gospel is imperative. As will be further explained below, the Gospel to Paul is simply the proclamation of the good news that Jesus has been declared the Son of God by God raising him from the dead, validating his death on



the cross as the means by which the one who believes is pardoned from all sin. Paul's desire is to come to Rome to proclaim this one and only gospel (εὐαγγελίσασθαι), the good news of Jesus Christ. It is this Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) which alone holds God's power for salvation.

Paul also connects God's power with His eternal purpose of salvation for those who believe and eternal wrath against the workers of evil, (יְרֵאֵל לְעַם). The workers of evil in the Psalms (Ps. 14:4, LXX - οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν, workers of iniquity) becomes the workers of unrighteousness (ἐργάται ἀδικίας, Lk. 13:27) who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων<sup>18</sup>, Rom. 1:18). Once again the struggle between the righteous who believe the Gospel and the unrighteous who do not is declared to be more than just a degree to which the oppressed and underprivileged are able to struggle up the social ladder. It means that the power to receive eternal deliverance from God's wrath is available only through the means established by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

## 2. God's Power Demonstrated by Raising Jesus from the Dead

What is most significant about the power of God for Paul is its connection with God's declaration of Jesus to be the Son of God by God raising Him from the dead. It is this "Gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, . . . who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (ROM. 1:2-4). This is in no way simply a destructive power, but a creative power of miraculous proportions. So unique and creative is this

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<sup>18</sup> κατεχω in the active pt. expressing the propagating or teaching of unrighteousness in an offensive assault against the Gospel rather than merely a passive resistance to the Gospel.

power that Paul signals it as the source of such a powerful testimony to God's character itself through its creative wonders of nature, just as it has been shown throughout the Psalms. However, for Paul, it goes further than just the wonders of creation. It declares even within the unrighteous that what is known about God is evident in them by His power, even to the point of His eternal nature. So great is this manifested power that God has already made known that the workers of unrighteousness are without an excuse for their wickedness (Rom. 1:19-20).

Paul further develops the significance of the dependence of the believer's faith upon Jesus' resurrection in 1 Cor. 15. He begins by establishing the fact that it is the Gospel of Jesus, which he had preached to them, which they had received, by which they were saved, and in which they now stand (1 Cor. 15:1,2). He then says this Gospel which he delivered to them *as first importance* is the one which he received (15:3). The impact this has upon one's understanding of God's power is crucial. Paul does not recognize any power of God distinct and separate from Jesus' death, resurrection, and Second Coming. Neither does he recognize any power of God apart from salvation, for if one wishes to posit a meaning to God's power apart from the cross and resurrection, then all preaching and believing is in vain. He says, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain." "For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." (1 Cor. 15:13-14,16-17).

The *first importance* of Christ's resurrection then is that it is the means by which God demonstrated His power by declaring Christ's sacrificial death acceptable to the

Father and Jesus to be the Son of God. It is also the first fruits of the final resurrection, in which God's power will raise all believers in Christ. "Then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet." (15:24-26). At this consummation of the ages all power, rule, and authority, which God has given for a time for humans to use, will revert back once again to its maker and source. Not only the power humans have been allowed to use but also the power of death to destroy humans and all other creation will be finally subjected to Christ, so that when all things are subjected to Christ, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

### 3. God's Power Operating Through Paul

For Paul though, God being all in all is not just some hope in a future state of existence. God is all in all in present reality, yet God's all encompassing power is revealed only through Christ in the Gospel. The other expressions of God's power by Paul are his use of God's work and deeds accomplished through the Gospel. Paul ties together the aspect of his ministry with the purpose of Christ's Gospel in a way that gives him boldness, yet places himself far in the background behind the power of God through the Holy Spirit as he says in Rom. 15:17-19:

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power<sup>19</sup> of signs and wonders, in the power<sup>20</sup> of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Paul makes it clear here that he possesses no power in himself. What great miracles are done in his ministry and life are done solely by God and for God's purpose through the

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<sup>19</sup> δυναμις



preaching of the Gospel. It is the Gospel itself that possesses the power of signs and wonders and brings about obedience to God in the new believer.

Not only does Paul not dare to speak of anything except what God has done through him, his boasting is only through God's power and his reliance is solely in the Gospel of the cross of Christ. He makes this most explicit in 1 Cor. 1:18-25 where he equates God's power with the Gospel of the cross of Christ. "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). And he adds, "we preach Christ crucified, . . . to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:23-25). Paul further identifies God's power solely with the cross of Christ in the next chapter when he widens the gap between the wisdom of the world and the power of God. He says in 1 Cor. 2:2-5,

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Paul's faith and trust resides completely in the power and redemption of God through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection. Apart from the cross and resurrection there is no real faith. Apart from the demonstration of power through the cross and resurrection there is no access to the power of God through the Holy Spirit. One must also accept God's eternal plan of redemption to be a participant in the eschatological fulfillment at the end of time, when, by Christ, all who are His at his coming shall be made alive, "then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to

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<sup>20</sup> δυναμις

the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:23-25).

### C. Other New Testament Aspects of God’s Power

#### 1. God’s Power of Protection in the Sanctuary of His Church

Even though the death and resurrection of Christ has completed the work of redemption for the believer, there remains a tension in the believer’s life between the complete work of justification by Christ and the works of the enemy which attempt to destroy the Gospel and all believers. It is this same accusing of the brethren that was seen in Psalms that is present in Paul’s works as well. With Christ as the Good Shepherd, however, His power over His flock wards off any intruders who would try to snatch a believing soul. “No one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (Jn. 10:29). As Lord over His church, Christ also has empowered the church to be not only the proclaimer of His power, but a sanctuary of protection, in the same way the sanctuary was seen in the Psalms as the protection against the accusers of the soul. Cyril Powell says, “The Church is thus the agency continuing Christ’s ministry, proclaiming His Gospel, carrying the fact and the power of His Victory to men, and bringing them into the life of salvation. It is also the fold into which others are brought, and is thus *both the means and the object* of strengthening and empowerment.”<sup>21</sup> (italics added).

Powell further identifies the church as the agent and bearer of God’s power. He adds:

The Church, the Spirit-possessed society, is the realm of *δουλιμισ* and *ενεργεια*, mediating and witnessing to the power of God as salvation. It is also the sphere promoting growth in character and the ‘fruits’ of the Spirit. The life principle behind the Church is thus the power of God, energizing it in every detail, and informing and empowering the whole. Her destiny

<sup>21</sup> Cyril H. Powell, *The Biblical Concept of Power* (London: Epworth Press, 1963), 150.

is to fulfill all that God promised to ancient Israel, and to continue 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach'. She is the vehicle of God's truth, the bearer of the Gospel, the agent of God's salvation in Christ, as well as the home and shelter of His people, where in the *κοινωνία* Christ's gifts are to be discovered and used.<sup>22</sup>

With this view of God manifesting his power to, in, and through the Church to its members and then to the world, the individual participates in God's power through participation in Christ's Church. Of course the Church is not a sacrament or a means of grace, but it is the avenue by which God graces His people with His word and the sacraments. The Church alone preaches Christ's Gospel of grace. The uniqueness and distinction of the Church is upheld in that God's power operates through members of His Church as a sign of His presence and glory. He does not share His glory with any other.

The power of God, which flows through His church, is also unique in that Christ established and maintains the authority and vitality of the church solely by the gifts of the Spirit. This Christ-established structure operates by divine right (*de iure divino*) whereas the power structures of the political world operate by human right (*ius humano*).

Difficulty and confusion arise when the ecclesiastical structure is taken over and manipulated by human initiative with little or no concern for the divine workings of the Holy Spirit's authority and power. When the church is short-changed of its status as being the sole agency by which God brings His order to witness to and against the human order of the world (Matt. 28:18), the power of God working through the church is greatly diminished.<sup>23</sup> While it must be recognized that human factors, such as church leaders participating in the practical working out of pastoral calls, for the divine power of God to work as He wills these "human rites must not take precedence over or contradict the rites

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<sup>22</sup> Powell, 152-53.



that are rights by divine authorization and institution” (A[ugsburg] C[onfession] XVIII).<sup>24</sup> The relationship between the individual believer, who has direct access to God’s power, and the church, who is the intermediary between and the dispenser of God’s power to the believer, goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is an area that must be examined in greater detail in order to establish more clearly just what it means for the believer to speak of God’s power flowing through their lives.

## 2. The Spiritual Enemies of God’s Power

In further continuity with Kraus’ identification of the enemy powers being beyond the physical and temporal enemies of Israel, Paul too identifies the enemies of the soul as physical trials such as persecution and famine, but they are much more. They are angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, or any other created thing (Rom. 8:38,39). With all of this assault from the workers of evil against the soul of the believer, what is a Christian to do in order to be assured of faith, justification, and eternal salvation? Paul gives the answer in Rom. 8:31-35, and 37-39, by the work Christ has already done by His dying and raising from the dead and His sitting at the right hand of God interceding for us (8:34). As in Psalms, this power God has over all His enemies is demonstrated to His children through his love, the same  $\text{לֶחֶם}$  (covenantal loyalty) love as in Psalms. None of these assaults from without will ever be able to separate the believer from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

## II. The Power of God in the Life of the Believer

Even though Christ has already won the victory over all principalities and powers by His resurrection, Paul recognizes the ‘not yet’ consummated victory of Christ in the

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Schrieber, “Power and Orders in the Church ‘according to the Gospel’: In search of the Lutheran Ethos,” *Concordia Journal* (January, 2000): 7.

eschaton. He instructs believers to “be strong<sup>25</sup> in the Lord and in the strength<sup>26</sup> of His might<sup>27</sup>.” Obviously, the Lord is the one who possesses the strength and the believer is encouraged to ‘put on’ all of the armor, in the verses following, in order to stand against the evil powers of the devil. Paul proclaims that our struggle is not against flesh or blood (the material physical world that we can see and identify), but “against the rulers, against the powers and world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (NAS, Eph. 6:12).<sup>28</sup>

It is just this dimension of the struggle against the powers (εξουσια) and spiritual forces of wickedness (τα πνευματικα της πονηριας) in this verse and the principalities (αρχαι) and powers (δυναμεις) of Rom. 8:38 that is the subject of much debate in the church today. The debate centers over just how much of an active role the believer takes in God’s power flowing through him/her to thwart the evil activity of these hostile demonic powers. The lynchpin is the term ‘flowing’. This is where the biblical theology of God’s power that has been shown above comes to bear on believers today. First, as the source of all power, any and all activity (whether divine or human) always originates in God Himself and remains God’s power no matter where or in whom it flows. At one end of the first continuum, many believers today nullify God’s power by shutting off what God might otherwise desire to do in and through their lives if they would just recognize their lives as channels of God’s power to their world. In denying

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<sup>24</sup> Schrieber, 9.

<sup>25</sup> The middle-passive imperative of ενδυναμοω, ‘be strong’, ‘be strengthened’.

<sup>26</sup> κρατος, power, might, or strength. KJV - power, NIV - (adj) mighty, NAS - strength

<sup>27</sup> ισχυς, power, might, or strength. KJV - power, NIV - power, NAS - might

<sup>28</sup> NIV - against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, KJV - against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.



God's power at work today, God's power is limited by unbelief. At the other end, many believers today manipulate God's power for their own agenda and glory, distorting God's true power into an unrecognizable and undesirable form. By their mixing of God's power with the profane of human psychological manipulation, God's power is limited to the realm of human understanding. The liberation theologians, on the second continuum, rob God's power of its rightful glory and honor through Christ's death and resurrection by redefining it in social and political terms. By their denying God's power in the supernatural, God's power is limited by what humans can do in their 'borrowed power'.

#### **A. The First Continuum – Living in the Center of God's Power**

In today's Western Christianity, affected heavily by anti-supernatural rationalism on one side and the personal craving for power on the other, the debate rages between polar opposites; the former represented by those who believe all of God's power for the believer resides completely in the act of salvation (but with little concern for the believer's everyday life) and the latter by those such as John Wimber's Vineyard Fellowship movement who believe Christians are soldiers in the conflict armed with authority to oppose Satan and cast him out. Wimber calls these clashes between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan "power encounters".<sup>29</sup> The other side is represented by those who believe that God's power is best represented not by power encounters, but by the written text of Holy Scriptures. James Boice uses Eph. 6 as the example of passively "being clothed" with Christ's righteousness rather than actively doing "miracle working as the way to do battle against Satan".<sup>30</sup> He also says, "the way to defend ourselves against Satan's onslaught is not by miracles but by the effective

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<sup>29</sup> James M. Boice, "A Better Way: The Power of the Word and Spirit" in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* Michael Scott Horton, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 123.



proclamation and teaching of Scripture.”<sup>31</sup> In this line of thought, it is usually emphasized how that even Jesus himself used the Scriptures to defend himself against the devil’s temptations and twisting of Scripture.

Even though Boice makes a strong case for the proper function of miracles, in his rush to eliminate the supernatural for present day believers, he errs in the comparison between repeating the miracles of the early church with repeating the crossing of the Red Sea.<sup>32</sup> With this move, one could ask if he then would equate all that God did in Acts with all that God did in Exodus? For Boice, the Church’s norm for teaching is “to be determined by the New Testament’s explicit teaching, and, as we have seen, the New Testament does not teach that evangelism is to be done by cultivating miracles.”<sup>33</sup> However, he then rightly says that the bottom line is “that signs and wonders are not to replace the *focus of the gospel on Christ and Him crucified.*”<sup>34</sup> (italics added). The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, accompanied by the power of Christ through His Spirit, makes the proclamation effective. In other words, in the proclamation of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, there resides God’s true power. Any deviant form of evangelism is a distortion of God’s power. He gives three reasons for this type of evangelism constituting God’s real power: 1) because it is focused on Jesus’ work alone, 2) because it calls for faith on the part of the hearer, and 3) because the teaching of the Word of God accompanied by the power of the Spirit of God is effective.<sup>35</sup>

But does God’s power being manifested today through physical miracles necessarily usurp the central message of the Gospel if they are seen as a *result* of the

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<sup>30</sup> Boice, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

power inherent in the Gospel proclamation itself rather than the *means* by which the message proclaimed? Or must the power of God be understood so narrowly through the proclamation of the Gospel and the event of salvation in the individual as to preclude any other manifestations of God's power in the believer? Is it possible that God could manifest His power either prior to salvation, as a testimony to His power for salvation, or after salvation, as a result of His power working through the believer by the Holy Spirit? I believe Paul does locate the power of God in the content and preaching of the Gospel, yet sees the Gospel as the fulfillment of the promise of power for the believer. However, since the power of God was manifested solely through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for salvation, there is no promise of power for anyone who does not come through Christ neither stays completely centered in Christ.

It is more than just a promise however; it is a post-Easter reality that the resurrection of Jesus signified a new power with an eschatological dimension. Jesus had promised His power to the disciples after that the Holy Spirit had come upon them so that they would be witnesses unto Him throughout the whole world (Acts 1:8). This certainly signifies both a christological and missiological centrality to God's power. The Gospel is truly the power unto God for salvation, but, for Paul, this is an ongoing demonstration of God's power through the message of Jesus. Where the Gospel of Jesus is being rightly proclaimed there will be accompanying signs and wonders of God's power through believer's lives. Because Jesus is more than just a historical figure, the power represented by His resurrection is not just for the past, but the present and future.

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<sup>34</sup> Boice, 128.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-135.

Furthermore, if ones views justification as the restoration of spiritual rightness, which points to the ultimate rightness of all things when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28), then the power of God is also inherent within justification to produce other rightness, including the rightness of the physical and relational worlds of the believer, which also points to the ultimate restoration of those dimensions as well (1 Cor 15:35-56). Brevard Childs says it well, Paul does not just tell stories of the earthly Jesus, but “bears witness to the eschatological meaning and the explosive power of the resurrected One for past, present, and future time. The Gospel can never be solely about events of the past because it unleashes a divine power for present and future.”<sup>36</sup>

Peter declared this dynamic power of Jesus’ Gospel very well in Acts 3 when he explained the healing of the lame beggar. He declared it was truly “on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man who you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all” (Acts 3:16). After spending the night in jail, Peter and John were asked by the rulers and elders “by what power, or in what name” they had done this miracle. Their simple reply was “by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by this name this man stands here before you in good health” (Acts 4:10). This is precisely the example of how God’s power is manifested through the Gospel message. Where the name of Jesus Christ is declared - as the resurrected Lord of heaven and earth for all eternity - God’s power is operational in showing His approval of the Gospel message.

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<sup>36</sup> Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology for the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 236.



Are there counterfeits? Satan has always made sure of distorting God's gifts to the point that even Christians can be deceived to the point of rejecting the real gifts. But, does Satan's deceptive power nullify God's real power? Do counterfeit manifestations and miracles of God's power negate God's true miracles? Not in reality, but they have been negated in the hearts and minds of those who have rejected God's power for the believer today. For them it is simply easier to reject God's power out-of-hand than to deal with getting one's "hands dirty" by dealing with those who distort it with human manipulation and deceit. However, what if Moses would have given up on God's power after the third plague because the wicked magicians of Pharaoh were imitating God's power? So it goes today. God's power accompanies the preaching of the Gospel. God's power is operational in the Gospel message; it can be accepted by faith, rejected in unbelief, imitated, or humanly manipulated, but it cannot be changed.

### **III. The Second Continuum – The Failure of Human Power over Evil**

It is clear by this biblical understanding of God's power, that there are those who still distort it by bringing it so far 'down to earth' that there is very little left for God to ever do in the spiritual realm of the believer or the church. Liberation theology has done just this very thing by seeing God's power as primarily manifested in the political and social arenas, as was touched on earlier in regards to the lack of distinction between the human right of government versus the divine right of the church. By doing so, even the powers and principalities of the world, which Paul describes in Eph. 6:12, are seen not as spiritual forces but as merely political forces for the abused and forsaken people of society to overcome. They have turned the spiritual struggle between God and His enemies into a struggle of the weak and poor to improve their social and economic

conditions. The emphasis that was seen earlier in the Psalms, of the powers of the physical world referring to evil forces in the spiritual world, is eliminated from this theology. Such is the theology of J. P. M. Walsh, who says this purpose of God is to “free us from the deadly determinism of the Principalities and Powers, so that we can live according to God’s *sedeq*.”<sup>37</sup> He goes on to say this eliminates hungry children, crushing injustices, and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable and in their place are God’s “Blessing, Life, and Good.”<sup>38</sup> Whereas there is no dispute that there certainly may be major social impact when God makes people right with His justification, to see this social change as the goal of the Gospel distorts biblical eschatology as well as God’s spiritual goal for the Gospel in individual lives.

Walter Wink also sees God’s power primarily in its physical manifestation rather than in the spiritual realm. He describes evil powers as the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ of any given manifestation of power. When any “particular power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God’s purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic. The church’s task is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purposes in the world . . .”<sup>39</sup> For Wink, demonic powers are all powers which contradict God’s purpose. They include every power that has ever been set up by human beings.

Wink, and other liberation theologians, have it upside down. Social change does not bring people into conformity to God’s power of redemption. Rather, God’s power of redemption in a person’s life will bring about social change, one life at a time. In Wink’s

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<sup>37</sup> J. P. M. Walsh, *The Mighty From Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 164.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding, instead of God's power remaining at His discretion, bringing glory to Himself and His church, God's power is the power of individuals through the struggle of self-awareness to effect change in themselves and their world. This self-awareness results in seeing God's power enabling one to strive for the justice of Jesus' "actual intention" in their relationships, their government, and their world.<sup>40</sup>

Such a theology of God's power strips it away from its biblical context and places it in a largely anthropocentric context. This theology forgets whose power they are dealing with in the first place. They take God's power, in effect, and made it their own.

But, in time, self-made power runs out and it is only God's power that sustains those whose hope is in Him. God does give His strength (אִזְרָא) to the weary and increases the power (יָאֵץ) of the weak, but [only] those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength (Jer. 40:31). It is when people take God's power away from Him and His plan of redemption that the power becomes null and void. At that point they are only operating in their own strength apart from the Gospel. Sure destruction awaits such people and they will be 'powerless' to do anything about it. What power they believe to possess will be stripped away in a moment, leaving them to realize for eternity that God's power was evident within them "for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His *eternal power* and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." (Rom. 1:19-20 italics added).

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, The Powers, Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, Vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 189.



It is only by seeing God's power as correlated to His plan of creation and redemption that the limits of one's finitude are overcome. Wolfhart Pannenberg makes this connection between God's omnipotent power over creation, His plan of redemption, and the eternal Trinity to show the relation between God's infinity and man's finitude. He says the goal of creation is the independent existence of creatures, but that when the creature turns away from the Creator, "it falls into nothingness".<sup>41</sup> He then relates the eternal fellowship of the Trinity and the plan of sending the Son in redemption to creation's limitations. It is in the sending of the Son that the omnipotence of God finds its expression by emancipating the creature from the nothingness it has fallen into. He adds:

In this act of deliverance God does not encounter the apostate creature with power and holiness. He is present with it at its own place and under the conditions of its existence. In the life of the creature there is thus realized the relation that corresponds to God's deity. This takes place through the eternal Son, who in consequence of his self-distinction from the Father takes the place of the creature and becomes man so as to overcome the assertion of the creature's independence in the position of the creature itself, i. e., without violating its independence.

We are thus to view the incarnation of the Son as the supreme expression of the omnipotence of God along the lines of the divine will, set already at creation, that the creature should live.<sup>42</sup>

This, however, places the greatest act of God's power at the incarnation rather than at the cross and resurrection, thus setting in motion the life of Jesus being the example of the believer's overcoming of the world. Even though Pannenberg distances himself from the likes of Schleiermacher, who thought it unnecessary to think of God distinct from His

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<sup>41</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 420.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 420-21.

creation<sup>43</sup>, he, nevertheless, still affirms God's overcoming of the world as the creature's overcoming of its own finitude. The Son's overcoming of the 'world' in John 16:33 is His overcoming of "that which willfully persists in its limitations, revolting by self-affirmation against its finitude."<sup>44</sup> He defines God's power further by saying,

More detailed discussion of the omnipotence of God demonstrates that it can be thought of only as the power of divine love and not as the assertion of a particular authority against all opposition. That power alone is almighty which affirms what is opposite to it in its particularity, and therefore precisely in its limits, which affirms it unreservedly and infinitely, so that it gives the creature the opportunity by accepting its own limits to transcend them and in this way itself to participate in infinity.<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt that God demonstrated His power in the Son's incarnation and exemplary life of obedience to the Father's will. However, to say God's power is most manifested by His 'affirming that which is opposite precisely in its limits', is to minimize God's power through the cross and resurrection's and to maximize Christ's actualization of God's power incarnate. To reiterate Paul's message of Rom. 1:16-17, God's power was not manifested by Christ merely being the example by which we can overcome the limits of our finitude. Rather, Christ's cross and resurrection demonstrated His already having won the victory over all finitude. All it takes for the believer to share in this victory is to believe, for the Gospel's salvation is for everyone who believes. There is no victory left for the believer to win over their infinitude. The believer must only live with the same tension as that of the psalmist and Paul who both acknowledged the power of God through His 'already' won victory and its 'not yet' completed consummation.

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<sup>43</sup> Pannenberg, 419.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

However, the Gospel of Jesus Christ encompassed both dimensions. That is why Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel and neither should we.

### Conclusion

As has already been shown, an individual's life is changed when he/she comes into contact with the power of God through the Gospel message of salvation. Likewise, the power of God through the Gospel does not change when it comes into contact with an individual's life situation. It is only when a person tries to manipulate it in their hand that it vanishes through their fingers. Then all they are left with is some demonically inspired substitute, which Satan has shaped in the futile wisdom (human's *philio sophia*) of their minds. They are the ones Paul described to Timothy as those who "have a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (2 Tim. 3:5). The ones who live at either end of the first continuum have a form of godliness but God's power is denied. Both ends of this continuum have erected a human structure of thought which limits at one end and manipulates at the other, neither one allowing, by faith, God to work His own purpose in their lives.

Anyone who extracts the power of God from the central message of His salvation through Christ's death, resurrection, and His future consummation of all power and authority, (God's *Theos logia*) has not only lost God's power, but also God Himself. The ones who have accepted the second continuum of liberation theology have extracted God's power away from salvation and from Christ Himself. They have erected a human structure of thought, which not only limits but also nullifies God's power through salvation. To them salvation is not spiritual and eternal but physical and temporal. This nullification of the Gospel necessarily nullifies God's power. For anyone to have God's



power he/she must not be ashamed of the Gospel, for it alone is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). This message is still the only true power for the church, the individual, and the world. While it is true that God allows people to disallow, limit, manipulate, or neglect His power in their lives and in their world, it is also true that God's power is unaffected by this same human distortion.

God's power is no less available to the church and to believers today than when Jesus first promised the Holy Spirit to His disciples, saying: "And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49). This same power of God is available to anyone who believes, but it remains today as then, from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit, through the Word and Sacraments, to the church, and to the believer.

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