

I. The Problem with Power

A. A few definitions of “power”:

- The ability to control people and events (Cambridge)
- The right or ability to govern, rule, or strongly influence people or situations (Britannica)
- The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events (Oxford Languages)

B. The lure of power/control is seen in the account of The Fall. A desire to be in control is at the very heart of our sin nature.

³...but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶So when the woman saw that...the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate... (Gen. 3:3-6, ESV)

1. The allure was to be able to discern between good and evil *like God*, so that they could act autonomously; “power to control events.”
2. The act of defying the one boundary God had laid out for them was an act of control.

C. Scripture includes many directives for leaders that are designed to safeguard leaders against being corrupted by power:

1. The laws for kings (Deut. 17:14-20) were all to prevent the king from self-aggrandizing. This included being subject to the Law, received from the Levitical priests, *“that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers”* (v.20).
2. God spoke to kings through prophets, who themselves were subject to the kings. Therefore, the king had to submit to directives from his subordinates. This required humility. When they submitted, they prospered; when they refused, they paid a cost. (See 1 Sam. 15, 2 Sam. 12; most of 1 & 2 Kings/Chronicles)
3. Jesus specifically instructed his disciples about what leadership among the people of God was to look like, and it was to be opposite of what was seen in politics.

²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mt. 20:25-28, ESV)

4. Jesus' own example was one of laying down absolute power. This is partly why He is declared "worthy" in Revelation 5 – He did the very thing the first Adam (and every human since) was unable to do.

⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... (Phil. 2:5-7, ESV)

- D. "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority." -Lord Acton
 1. "Despotic power is always accompanied by corruption of morality." (*ibid*)
 2. "Everybody likes to get as much power as circumstances allow, and nobody will vote for a self-denying ordinance." (*ibid*)
- E. The problem with power is that it has a corrupting effect on the one who wields it. Christians are far from immune to this effect.

II. Considering the History of the Relationship Between the Church and Power

- A. Pre-dating the Church (Old Testament), the people of Israel lived out a continuous cycle of backsliding when life was comfortable and political fortunes were good.
- B. 312 AD – Constantine becomes emperor and converts to Christianity (political move?). From this date onwards, Christianity enjoyed a strong relationship with many political powers in Europe; the Church was in bed with the state.
 1. There were many benefits to this. Most notably, it normalized some Christian values and principles. Most western values today are rooted in Christian principles (though some have been stretched to sinful extremes). Values like freedom, the value and dignity of the individual and women, concern for the poor and the sick, etc.
- C. The Church became very powerful and influential, to the point that its influence overarched political powers. One commentor likened the Church of this era to the EU of today – an overarching political body over the individual states' governments. Some of the fruits of this "reign" (over 1,000 years):
 1. Consolidation of wealth – the Church had the power to tax; built phenomenal cathedrals while many languished in poverty (they did give alms, provide shelter and care, but there were certainly excesses).

2. Consolidation of education – if you weren't clergy, you were likely uneducated. Scriptures were produced in Latin, which only the educated could read (putting scriptures in common language was a major disruption which contributed to the start of the Reformation). Partly due to the consolidation of education, this era became known as "the Dark Ages" due to a lack of discoveries and advancements.
 3. Consolidation of power – the Church used force to demand that all accept its authority. Because of its influence, the Church played the role of "king maker" in many situations. Clergy swore allegiance to the Pope instead of their king. The consolidation of power led to the atrocities of the Crusades and the Inquisition.
- D. There are some more current examples of the problem of power in the Church setting.
1. When National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1930, the salaries of clerics were paid by the state. Most of the German Church forfeited its prophetic voice in Nazi Germany – not only refusing to speak against the abuses of the government but twisting Scripture to justify them – for the sake of preserving favour and finances.
 2. Separate from politics, we are seeing today how consolidated power in Church leadership structures has allowed clergy abuse to proliferate in many places.

III. The Church, Effective Kingdom Witness, and Power

- A. Unfortunately, the pattern has been that the Church does a better job of advancing the Kingdom of God when it is not enjoying political power; more specifically, it seems to bear the most fruit when it is subject to political persecution.
1. In the Old Testament, it was times of slavery, oppression, and decline that caused the people of Israel to cry out to God, and He came through in power.
 2. In the Book of Acts, the Church consistently grew in places where it experienced strong resistance (Jerusalem, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, etc.).
 3. The Church continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire as various Emperors targeted believers with persecution, executions.
 - a. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" -Tertullian
- B. Even today, the Church is thriving in some of the nations that have the strictest stances against Christianity (Iran, Afghanistan, China, etc.).
- C. In the book of Acts, there is one example of the Church growing in a time of peace: in the immediate aftermath of Saul's conversion, when persecution quieted down.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (Acts 9:31, ESV)

1. Luke notes that the believers were walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Not in the comfort of having won over their fiercest persecutor or being able to let their guard down. They continued in the fear of the Lord.

IV. Conclusion

- A. The Church is called to be salt and light in every sphere of society, wherever we are placed. For many, that includes the political sphere.
- B. The Church is called to be a prophetic witness of the Kingdom of God to all of society, including the political sphere.
- C. We must remain mindful that power and privilege have a drowsing effect on people, including the Church. They make us comfortable and cause us to drop our guard. But we are called to remain vigilant and watchful (Prov. 4:23; Mt. 16:6; Lk. 21:34; 1 Cor. 16:13; Eph. 5:15-18; Col. 4:2; 1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Pet. 1:10; 3:14; 2 Jn. 8).
- D. When the Church comes into a favourable political situation, she must intentionally have two primary responses:
 1. Vigilance – to know that the task (Great Commission) is not completed, nor will be completed by a favourable political situation. The Church must resist the temptation to coast, and remain on the offensive.
 2. Humility – perceived victory in the political sphere is no occasion for pride and boasting. If anything, there must be a determination to remain in humility; to have the same mind as Jesus (Phil. 2:6) and continue to take the posture of a *servant*. Arrogance and boasting undermines any work of the Kingdom and will eventually find us in opposition to God Himself (Prov. 3:34; Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).