

How the Church Lost This Crucial Element Over 2 Millennia

Love and power, like oil and water, do not mix.

The well-known sociologist Willard Waller discovered that there seems to be an inverse relationship between love and power. He noted that in interpersonal relationships, as love increases, power decreases, and as power increases, love decreases. As he studied the matter, Waller coined the term “principle of least interest” to describe a surprising phenomenon: Power lies in the hands of the person who cares the least about the relationship.

This is evident when a couple whose marriage is disintegrating receives counseling. The counselor can immediately tell which one loves the least; it is the one sitting in the power seat and making demands. The one who truly loves has let go of power and is willing to make any sacrifice to save the marriage.

Love and power, it seems, cannot coexist, at least in this world.

That is why when the time came for God to demonstrate His love for humanity, He set aside His power. Paul speaks of this in Philippians 2:6-7 (NLT), where he describes how Christ emptied Himself of the power He had known with the Father and became as a powerless slave. He wrote, “Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges. He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.”

This is why the Messiah, who had come to reveal God’s love, was born in a stable, and His first bed was a feeding trough

for animals. This explains why the Christ was born not into a wealthy aristocratic family, but into a poor family who offered up two doves and a pigeon in the temple, an alternative offering allowed by Scripture for families who could not afford a lamb (Lev. 12:8; Luke 2:22-24).

This explains why He grew up in Nazareth, an insignificant and despised village, well away from the power centers of Jerusalem and Rome. It also explains why He showed no interest in Herod's throne, Pilate's authority or the position of high priest. Jesus had come to demonstrate God's love, and He could not show love while at the same time seeking power.

It should come as no surprise then that Jesus directed His disciples away from visions of power to thoughts of service. For example, when James and John requested the two power seats in His kingdom, Jesus rebuked them for their preoccupation with power (see Matt. 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-41). Power coerces and controls outward behavior. Love woos and influences and changes hearts.

But make no mistake, this is not a namby-pamby kind of love. It is not for the weak and selfish. This love requires great strength and resilience. This is love that desires the best for the other person and is willing to sacrifice its own self-interests to see it happen. The ultimate example of this love, known in the Greek New Testament as *agape*, is found in Jesus Christ.

Love Over Power

Consider this example. A father became distressed over the rebellion of his young son, whom he had disciplined again and again. One day, as he was about to apply another punishment, he was overcome with grief for his son and suddenly fell at the boy's feet, weeping profusely. The son was stunned and stood speechless, but from that moment, he was changed. A simple display of love can be more effective than many

displays of power and strength.

In the Old Testament, God demonstrated His power. He thundered from Sinai, parted seas, destroyed armies and even stopped the sun and moon in their paths. His people, however, continued to be a rebellious people, for they had not yet seen His love.

This is what Christmas and the cross are all about: God setting aside His power and showing humanity the depth of His love. Jesus called on His disciples to walk in this same *agape* love.

In John 13:34-35 (MEV), Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you; that you love (*agape*) one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another."

For the first 200 years of its existence, the church demonstrated the love of Christ and had great success spreading its influence throughout the earth. The church conquered the mighty Roman Empire without raising an army or lifting a sword.

Constantine, however, thought He knew better than Christ, and He began merging the church with power. The church began using the power of the state to advance its cause, and love took flight. Terrible atrocities were committed in the name of Christ as the medieval church gained power but lost influence.

The Reformation was a move away from power and back to the gospel of Christ. Nonetheless, many in the church today are still seeking "power." They are closer to Constantine than to Christ in this regard.

At Christmas, we celebrate God setting aside His power and coming to earth and demonstrating His love for humanity. This love would reach its apex at the cross, for nothing epitomized weakness like a crucified individual hanging on a Roman cross.

This is the challenge Christmas brings to the church. Are we following the example of Christ in letting go of power? Are we walking in pure love? Or are we, like Constantine, seeking to merge power with love?

In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul clearly states what our attitude and approach should be. He wrote, "Let this mind be in you all, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But He emptied Himself, taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in the form of a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."

Justice Will Come

Love makes us vulnerable, and we are sometimes tempted not to walk in love because people will take advantage of us. We must remember at such times that justice is an essential component of love. God is a God of justice, and no one is going to get away with anything.

Therefore, when He comes again, His power will be on full display. This time He comes not as a baby in a manger, but as the mighty sovereign Lord of the universe. For those who have rejected His love, it will not be nice. John saw a day when people would cry out to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16b).

Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, who were going through terrible persecutions, and exhorted them, "See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone. But always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thess. 5:15).

However, he wrote to those same Thessalonian believers: "And to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God and do not

obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They shall be punished with eternal destruction, isolated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

This Christmas, remember that we do not need to chase power, for we serve an all-powerful God. Instead, show love to one another, receive His love today and in so doing, avoid the wrath that is coming.

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