

# Why Is a Large Segment of the Church Powerless?

Anyone who is half-honest will admit that the church of the 21st century is powerless when compared to the church in the first century and at other times of great blessing. The problem is that making such a statement is akin to saying the emperor has no clothes since most feel quite content with their situation.

I know generalizations are exactly that, and I also freely admit that there are differences between the church in the West and other places where there still is a visible sense of God moving among His people. In broaching this topic we also have problems with terms, so allow me to define what I do, and do not, mean by power.

Power is not measured in noise, hype or even large numbers, just as the "anointing" is not measured in shouting, sweat and spit. Power cannot be measured in statistics, budgets, buildings or programs. A telling statement comes from a Third-World believer after visiting churches in the West: "It is amazing what the church in the West has been able to achieve without the Holy Spirit."

Power must be defined by the Scripture itself, and the definitive text is Acts 1:8: "*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" This promise of the Lord Jesus is made manifest by the disciples in the book of Acts as "*with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 4:33).

This power is visible in sinners powerfully transformed, in powerful preaching and, yes, in powerful miracles. And yes, I

am painfully aware that my own church and ministry fall into the category of the powerless!

The Greek word for “power” is *dunamis*. Many point out that the word “dynamite” stems from this word. While that is true, I do not believe that dynamite is what Jesus had in mind when He used this word, simply because dynamite results in a huge explosion, the release of great power, and then destruction and silence in its wake.

The word “dynamo” also comes from the word *dunamis*. A dynamo generates a constant flow of (electrical) power. The *dunamis* of the Spirit should not result in a momentary explosion (as in some questionable “revivals”) but in a constant empowering from within—driving the individual and the church forward in the face of difficulties and attacks, empowering lives that powerfully witness to the power of the gospel and the power of the cross.

This stands in stark contrast to modern conversions that seem to be more about joining, behavior modeling, and superficial assimilation; preaching that is clever, eloquent and impressive, but that leaves the sinner and the rebel unconverted; and a reliance on medical science, hype and advertising as a replacement for miracles.

The decline in the manifestation of God’s power among His people cannot be ascribed to cessationism, or hyper-dispensationalism. That there is a decline is beyond dispute, but the weakening of the church cannot have been part of God’s original design since the power of Acts 1:8 is intimately connected with the Great Commission, which has not yet been fulfilled. If the *dunamis* was specifically given to empower the witness of the church, and the Great Commission has not yet been withdrawn nor fulfilled, then the power must still be available.

Concerning the gifts, Harry Ironside said: “*There are*

*commentators who insist that some of these gifts have absolutely disappeared, but I do not know of any Scripture portion that tells us that. I do not know of any passage that says that the age of miracles has passed and I would not dare to say that the sign gifts all ended with Paul's imprisonment. I know from early church history that this is not true ... Therefore I do not think it is correct to take the position that these sign gifts have necessarily disappeared from the church. I do, however, believe that many of the gifts are not often seen today, and I think there is good reason for that. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 the apostle wrote, 'I have espoused you ... as a chaste virgin to Christ.' Paul was writing to a separated company, the affianced bride of the Lamb, and it was the delight of the blessed risen Lord to lavish upon her gift after gift. The Corinthians '[came] behind in no gift,' ... However, it seems to me that we can see in the book of Acts that as time went on and the church began to drift a little, and as dissension and other things that grieved the Lord arose, there was more reserve on His part in bestowing gifts. That, I believe, explains the lack of many of these gifts today. The church has gotten so far away from what she should be and there is so much strife, division, worldliness, and carnality that the Lord no longer delights in lavishing His gifts as freely as He did in the beginning."*

Before I continue, I also need to make it clear that while we are solely responsible for our anemic state, God remains sovereign, and we cannot manufacture a revival by applying a formula by which God then becomes obliged to fulfill our wishes. In a church I recently visited I was rebuked by an elder for not believing that we could absolutely bring about a revival as long as we simply prayed and believed hard enough!

But we cannot control, manipulate or force God into doing anything. At best, we can simply obey Him and then trust Him to do what He alone wills. The revivalist who touts various formulas for revival is no different than the prosperity

teacher, who believes we can bribe God to prosper him, or the Word of Faith evangelist, who believes that God is subject to his faith. To all these, God simply becomes a puppet on a string that dances to the tunes of men.

But, at the same time, it is very evident that we can do much that would hinder the work of the Spirit and that would prevent the Lord from pouring out His blessings on us. One of the misconceptions taught during the last century is the idea that the Holy Spirit and the attendant power is a gift and, since a gift cannot be earned, God will pour His Spirit on anyone who asks, irrespective of the individual or church's spiritual condition. Thus there have been accounts of unbelievers, drunkards, and other vile persons "filled with the Spirit". This is not the truth. There are clear conditions set for the receipt of the power of God.

### **Conditions to the Outpouring of the Spirit**

God does not give His Spirit to those who are disobedient to the Divine will. The Bible does not teach that God will bless and empower those who are disobedient but, on the contrary, there is a clear connection between our obedience and God's blessings in general, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit in particular: "... *the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him*" (Acts 5:32). Obedience obviously covers a huge area and would include things like holiness, obedience in ministry, and obedience to any of the many commands contained in the New Testament. The prime reason for a lack of power in the lives of individuals and churches is clear when one looks at the general disobedience so prevalent in churches today.

In John 14:15-16, Jesus said: "*If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever.*" Jesus Himself predicates the giving of the Spirit on loving Him, and the consequent obedience that flows from such love. Believers that love themselves, the world, pleasure, ease and comfort

are clearly excluded from this promise, as are those who do not love Him sufficiently to obey Him.

These two principles—love and obedience—cover everything else. But under these main principles there are a number of other more specific conditions.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter said: *“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38). Notice again the conjunction “and” which indicates that receiving the Holy Spirit will happen once the conditions had been met. Baptism here is symbolic of obedience. However, repentance seems to be the first condition.

By repentance Peter was referring to two main areas in which repentance is necessary. We need to repent from religion void of the cross. Peter was preaching to religious Jews but calls them to repent from their religiosity and to believe on the Lord Jesus. But clearly implied in the word “repent” is repentance from any form of sin and disobedience.

It is interesting that all great and true revivals are always accompanied and preceded by deep sorrow for, and repentance from, sin. The notion that the Lord will give His Spirit to a rebellious, sinful and unrepentant heart is utterly contrary to both Scripture and the holiness of God. Also, leaders cannot demand that their followers repent if they themselves are not truly broken before God.

The connection between obedience, sanctification, and the presence of God is illustrated in Exodus 40:18-38 where the tabernacle is a type of the individual believer, and also of the church. The text explains the final erection of the tabernacle and between verses 19-32; it says seven times that Moses did everything *“as the Lord commanded Moses.”*

Repeating that many times that Moses did as He was commanded

is highly significant. Following these seven repetitions, verse 33 says: *"So Moses finished the work."* This statement is immediately followed by: *"Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle"* (Exodus 40:34, emphasis mine).

Note the clear connection between Moses' obedience, completing the work as he had been commanded, and the descent of the glory of the Lord.

One of the very real reasons the believer and the church are powerless is our disobedience and sin. God will simply not anoint our disobedience, laziness and sin.

Many who desire the power of God in their lives, ministries, and churches also do not have it because they want it for the wrong reasons: *"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures"* (James 4:2-3). Some want God's power to make them look good, others want power over people, and others want power so their churches can grow for selfish reasons. While any reason other than the Lord's will is bad, nothing is worse than those who want God's power so they can make money out of it. This is not new. Simon the sorcerer seemed to be motivated by ego and money, and was even willing to offer money to purchase the gift of God (Acts 8).

Even without the real anointing of God, there is still good money to be made in selling books, videos and conferences on revival. If the peddlers of such books were serious about wanting revival, they would give the books away. Yet it is a lucrative segment of the Christian market. lists over 1500 titles on "revival" and over 6200 on "renewal."

The Lord will never bless our greed, lust for power, or desire for the honor of men. The thousands of prayers going up every day for power for the sake of power are a stench in the nostrils of God and will forever go unanswered. Only the

desire for more of Him, and not just His gifts, will be answered. Once again there is little difference between those who follow the Lord for financial riches and those who follow Him for spiritual gifts—both are rooted in selfishness, a lack of gratitude for the cross, and lack of true love for the Lord.

Those who have a pure motive pray that they may be consumed, broken and humbled in order to gain more of the Lord. They understand that when God's fire falls, all of the flesh must be consumed. They are not only willing to pay that price, but they desire the loss of all that they may gain Christ (Philippians 3:8). Only those with the right motive pray John's prayer: *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* (John 3:30).

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