A Biblical Theology of Power

Lynn R. Buzzard
Campbell University School of Law, buzzardl@campbell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.campbell.edu/fac_sw

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarship.law.campbell.edu/fac_sw/62

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Scholarly Repository @ Campbell University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Works by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository @ Campbell University School of Law.
Law seems inextricably bound up with issues of power — its legitimacy, appropriateness, scope, distribution, and role in God's economy for human life. Every person who seeks to function in the arena of law whether as lawyer, legislator, analyst, or reformer must reflect on the issue of power not only as a sociological and political category, but from a moral perspective as well. Law is a form of power and a formidable one at that. It represents, codifies, legitimizes, and perhaps even freezes power realities. This is even more clear in intellectual and political environments that view law simply as an expression of the will of the sovereign.

Not only does law at its conceptual level involve issues of power, but power is a very real function of the law firm collectively and the lawyer personally. Recent literature has been critical of the power of "superlawyers" and dominant Washington law firms. Articles such as "The Ethics of Powerlaw" reflect the level of awareness of power realities in legal practice. Nader task forces have taken lawyers to task for their exercise of unbridled power often wedded to economic and class interests. DeToqueville suggested that lawyers comprised the American aristocracy, and power is perhaps a vice particularly appealing to the aristocrat.

Not only does the lawyer in fact exercise power by virtue of systems and structures, but the lawyer has power additionally (perhaps even primarily) because he is perceived as having power. Lawyers are
the people who, we all believe, "can get things done." They are the priests with access to the secrets mere mortals never know. They speak the mysterious language and read the holy books. They have an awe about them, a mystery, a mystique, and therefore, they are powerful. It is as primitive and as compelling as a feeling of fear before the unknown.

Lawyers frequently cultivate and expand the aura of power that surrounds them. Their offices, homes, social relations, clients, desks, and clothes reflect a world of power.

An exploration of some biblical perspectives on power seems essential to a Christian reflection on the role of law, authority, and state in society. This introductory essay will seek to suggest a particular way of viewing power in biblical perspective and the implications for those who function vocationally in "power-environments."

I. The Theme of Power

Romano Guardini's suggestion that "the core of the new epoch's task will be to integrate power into life in such a way that man may employ power without forfeiting his humanity," indicates how crucial the issue of power is to 20th-century civilization. The issue of power is one that many feel confronts our age with accelerating urgency. The use of power, the concentrations of power, the deperson-

---

1 This concept is pursued with imagination even if exaggeration in Evan Illuch's The Disabling Professions which sharply criticizes the character of professions as self-glorifying, need-generating aspects of social life.

alization of power, the legitimization of power, and the bases of power seem all urgent questions in an atomic, electronic, allegedly post-Christian civilization.

**Power and the American Ethos**

Americans seem to have a love-hate relationship with power. We are both enamored by it and embarrassed by it. Our history suggests successive ways of approach and avoidance in the recognition of our place in world power politics. We are alternatively world saviors and isolationists.

This ambivalence toward our place in the world and the exercise of power surely emerged from multiple factors, but among them was not only the experience of the struggle for liberation from the European political and economic captivity, but also the self-consciousness of America as a new Israel. Israel as well experienced the double imagery of chosenness and weakness, and the political issues of whether to trust in Jehovah or to play politics with Egypt.

Events in the last decade, notably Vietnam and Watergate, have raised again the problem of power in American society. A spate of books has sought to sensitize the American conscience to the abuse of power: *The Limits of Power, The Arrogance of Power, The Abuse of Power*, and others.

Power has equally been the theme of the burgeoning pop-psychology and self-help literature. The book market has been inundated with volumes about aggressiveness training, personal power, achievement, and, in general, “how to get your own way.”
Social analysts, observing the withdrawal from activist styles in the student world, have observed the emergency of a "new narcissism," with an emphasis on personal fulfillment and "finding yourself" whether in drugs, religion, or self-awareness. The author's own recent experiences in theological and legal education confirm this widely reported shift from politics and sociology to psychology, from community to self, perhaps even from power to escape.

Yet for all the flight from power that may characterize much of modern American society, power continues to allure. One need only examine the film media to see modern man's fascination with power. There is power in nature, expressed in earthquakes, fires, sharks, and dogs. There is power beyond nature, beyond the natural which one can vicariously taste in "Star Wars" or "Encounters of the Third Kind." And there is, for those with a taste for the bizarre, the power of the occult, the demon, the exorcist. And now, finally, the celluloid celebrates power for all of us — Superman! It does not take an exaggerated flight into psychology to suggest that much of this emphasis on power in man's diversions may reflect profound inner urges that flow around the themes of power.

Power, like violence, seems as American as apple pie.

Power and the Christian Ethos

Christianity, in America at least, shares with the society at large its schizophrenia about power. There is a deep embarrassment about power on the
part of many sensitive Christians, an embarrassment that may in fact be appropriate and healthy. It is certainly understandable. Christians have been nurtured not only on common maxims such as Lord Acton's that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," but on a whole religious tradition that rarely suggested a positive image for power. As Tex Sample suggests, Christians have generally viewed the use of power as an "unbaptized activity."³

The emphasis, especially in evangelical and pietistic circles, on the cross, on self-sacrifice, on meekness and turning the other cheek, has effectively raised a presumption against power as an arena in which the godly live and move and have their being. Add to this a world view common in some Christian circles that sees the world as under the reign of the prince of darkness, and define the spiritual as either "out there" or as a completely inner experience and you have all the ingredients for a deep suspicion about power and the Christian life.

There is, of course, abundant human experience to which one may point in support of a thesis similar to that of Jacob Burckhardt that "power is in itself evil."⁴ Secular and religious history provides adequate illustrative material in support of a radical flight by the ethically and socially concerned Christian from the world of power.


The reality, of course, is that whether Christians wish to flee from power or not, they are arguably inextricably bound up with power both as subjects and wielders of power. Christians find themselves in positions of power in both structured and unstructured relations, in institutional and in interpersonal relations. Power is a reality at every level of human experience. The issue becomes, therefore, how are Christians, often nurtured on an antiworld, anti-power, devotional form of Christianity, to cope with the world of power in which they live, and which power so many of them exercise so regularly as part of their business or professional lives? How can they fit power into their concepts of spiritual life, discipleship, and commitment to the Gospel?

Three forms of response to this question seem common in the Christian community as this author experiences it. One common approach is simply to deny that one has or exercises power. A version of this denial stratagem was perhaps mastered at the secular level by Senator Sam Ervin who was wont to proclaim “I'm just a country lawyer” in a protestation against charges of intrigue, special cleverness, or the use of power. Such a denial of power is not only, as we shall indicate later, an abdication of responsibility, but the kind of distortion that aggravates the problem.

A second response is not the denial of power, but the assignment of the power realities of life to a realm outside the Christian faith. It creates a sphere independent of Christian ethics and discipleship, a sphere of the “world.” One maintains a vigorous, perhaps even in compensation, an exaggerated
pious personal life; but in public life, that same person exercises power with a toughness, perhaps even ruthlessness, unimpeded by the sensibilities of the religious self. Perhaps Chicago's late Mayor Daley embodied some aspects of this stratagem in coping with the faith of an Irish Catholic in a suffering Lord and his work as “The Boss” of the city.

The third response is the deliberate withdrawal from power — a sort of Tolstoyian rejection perhaps not unlike that of the recent Senator Harold Hughes who felt he could no longer hold public office or run for the presidency because of the moral conflicts in handling world power. Where the purported withdrawal is simply tactical, a sort of inverse power strategy through the creation of an illusion of powerlessness, then there is not a genuine withdrawal but a quite clear exercise in power. We refer here to those genuine moral withdrawals, at least in theory, from the exercise of power without regard to whether such a withdrawal will “work.” Neither should this category include those who reject power simply because they fear success. Some persons seem to have a vested interest in being part of a failing minority. Their own identity, perhaps in a strange way their own power, rests on the experience of the rejection. We do not address here the problems raised by those responses. We are, however, confronted with the genuine response of moral withdrawal from power. We shall address that issue later in this paper.

The Emergence of Power as a Contemporary Christian Theme
Recent movements in Christian circles, both in theological arenas and in popular movement, have raised to a new level of consciousness the issues of power in society and in the church. This recovery of an interest in power as a biblical concept is seen most dramatically in two quite diverse aspects of the life of the Christian community.

At one apparent end of the spectrum is the emergence of an intensified social ethic that has raised political and social questions with profound implications for power, its use and distribution. Among the most vocal in this group have been those who have called for the vigorous and righteous assertion of power as a means of claiming their own identity and asserting their God-given worth. Black power, Indian power, Gray power have all surfaced with many, especially the Black power movement, having a discernibly Christian tonality. Liberation theology in both Latin America and the United States has invited Christians to reread the biblical narratives of Moses standing before Pharaoh.

These groups, whether revolutionary or committed to a democratic process, share in common a fundamentally biblical critique of power as it is wielded against the interests of the outcast and poor, and, in the main, call for the use of a countervailing power that would move toward justice. These groups are cognizant of the power realities of political and social life and are prepared to do battle there for their spiritual brothers and sisters. They will not hear any more of "sweet bye and byes" and the glory of suffering.

At a quite different place on the theological
spectrum, but again with a special emphasis on power, is the diverse and rapidly growing charismatic movement. No word could better define the focus of this movement than the word “power.” The Spirit is power and has come to give victory to His people. The very gates of hell cannot prevail against His powerful spirit. His power comes and fills His people who are meant to be victorious and effective, reigning with Christ. It would be a mistake to assume that “power” in the charismatic context is relevant only for worship and interpersonal contexts. The vigor with which charismatics have functioned in social arenas and its popularity in business circles belies any simplistic dismissal of the charismatic as an escapist privatist.\(^5\)

It seems clear that the time is ripe for the Christian community to struggle more diligently than it has in recent years with a theology of power — that is, the development of an understanding of a biblical perspective of power that may inform the development of an ethic for those faced with the experience of power both as a subject and possessor.

**The Necessity in Society for an Ethic for Power**

The development of an ethic for power is timely for our whole culture which is increasingly troubled by, and dominated by, the exercise of power. Guar-

---

\(^5\) It has been observed by some that frequently those who talk most of power are probably those who do not wield it, and that the predominance of power-talk among minorities, charismatics, and perhaps other groups is an expression of the will-to-power and frustration at being outside the power flow. Even where this is the case, the emergence of the power-talk itself evidences a raised consciousness of the role of power and the desire to share it as opposed to acceptance of powerlessness.
Guardini suggests that sensitive persons in the 20th century can no longer believe that power is good, but rather recognize that “our growing power is a growing threat to ourselves.”\(^6\) Social and political critics of variant ideological stripe have noted with dismay and even fear the increasing concentration of power in government, institutional, and business structures. The issue is not simply one of private ethics, but of the whole fabric of the social order. The capacities for the abuse of power in military establishments, in the biological sciences, and in corporate, multinational structures are little short of frightening. Many share with Joseph Haroutunian a concern that the institutionalization and impersonalization of power in modern life is so separated from “distractions of conscience and humanity” as to make for a “new barbarism.”\(^7\) There is an increased sense of helplessness in the face of bureaucratized, systematized, and depersonalized power that can speak only of “policy,” “the public interest,” “the general welfare,” and “national interest.”\(^8\) Compound this increased capacity for power and its depersonalization with the decline of a common ethic and the potential for tragedy is apparent.

The Christian’s quest for a theology and ethic of power is also in the context of this larger social and

---

\(^6\) Guardini, p. xiii.

\(^7\) Joseph Haroutunian, *Lust for Power* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1940), p. 20.

\(^8\) Guardini suggests that the increasing tendency to use words like “progress,” “utility,” and “welfare” are in fact attempts to “hide” the use of power. The consequence is that subjecting power to an ethic is more difficult because of the camouflage.
political milieu. Classical Christianity, unlike some forms of optimistic secular humanism, has always recognized the seductive danger of political amassed power. As John Adams observed, "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak, and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all of his laws."

In the light of the widely felt crisis of power in contemporary society, it is astonishing that power has been so little subjected to social, ethical, and theological inquiry. We have given far too little thought to a fundamental reality of our life. *Time* magazine observed in 1967 that "the U.S. as the most powerful nation in the world has never systematically thought out the legitimate uses and inevitable limitations of power." ⁹

Kenneth Clark, the noted philosopher/historian, bemoans the failure of social psychologists to involve themselves in the study of power. While acknowledging such a study is made difficult by the abstract, diffuse, and ambiguous patterns of power, he suggests the more fundamental reason for the refusal to examine power may be found in our very psyches: "Power permeates every aspect of human life . . . perhaps its very pervasiveness leads to an attempt to avoid it — even to repress it psychologically." ¹⁰

We shall attempt to accept the challenge of reflecting more deliberately on the issue of power,

---

¹⁰Kenneth Clark, *Pathos of Power*, pp. 70, 71.
and particularly on the way in which a biblical perspective may shape not only a Christian's individual response to the reality of power in his or her life, but also the way in which biblical insights may give some guidance to our larger cultural crisis with power.¹¹

II. A Biblical Perspective on Power

"Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power . . ."
Revelation 5:12

This text from the vision of the consummation of history exemplifies the paradox of the biblical word about power. It is this paradox that makes the development of a coherent theology of power so difficult and even perhaps divisive. No theology of power that seeks to be faithful to Scripture dare ignore the paradox of biblical imagery symbolized by the quotation above. Slain Lambs, sufferant servants, crucified Messiahs, little towns, and nomads sit at the right hand of the Father in the Kingdom. This biblical emphasis on the strength of weakness, which is so fundamentally "contrary to history" and

¹¹ Definitions of power vary considerably, reflecting divergent conceptions of what forms of power-force-influence ought to be included in category "power." Tex Sample defines power as "the capacity to transact or impose control through the recognition, threat or use of sanctions." Kenneth Clark defines social power as "the energy to create, sustain, or prevent observable social change." C. Wright Mills talks simply of the ability to make decisions that have major consequences. Talcott Parsons points to concepts of sanctions and contract.

As used in this paper, power is used in a social and political context and the author has deliberately chosen not to focus on any specific definition. The purpose does not seem to require such, though admittedly some confusion may result.
“against nature,” is dramatically symbolized in two major biblical events, the election (or choosing) of Israel and the Incarnation. Both these events speak a word that cannot be silenced about the means and meaning of power, about the ultimate victory of emptiness, death, suffering, and weakness. They speak of what Henri Nouwen saw as the power of the “wounded healer” and Graham Greene perceived in the “whiskey priest” described in his classic and ironically titled *The Power and the Glory*.

Indeed, Scripture often calls for a deep suspicion about the ultimate effectiveness of power, not totally unlike Kenneth Clark’s observations that are reflected in the title of his work on power, *The Pathos of Power*. Israel is warned not to trust in chariots and swords, not in clever alliances, for “not by might nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord,” (Zechariah 4:6) will the victory be won. The Sermon on the Mount and the servant imagery of passages such as Isaiah 53 are not unique, only well-known texts that call to a style of life that is hardly marked by the careful calculus of power. What is powerful, the Scriptures declare, is the Word, more powerful than a two-edged sword, and by the Word the victory is won. “Without human power, simply by the Word,” declares the Augsburg Confession. The whole ministry of Jesus, and not simply the Cross, speaks eloquently of the self-emptying and servant-life that Paul recounts in the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. *Though Jesus* 

---

spoke of the power of God, when He spoke of human worldly power it was to point out the sham and illusion of the power of leaders without perception, understanding, or knowledge.13

Whether one finally agrees or not, there is sufficient biblical material to understand Martin Hengel's assertion that in Jesus there is "a fundamental renunciation of external means of exerting authority."14 To stop here would, however, present an incomplete vision of the biblical perspective on power, and force a response of ascetic withdrawal, or of illusory denial, or of neurotic double life. There is, of course, an attractiveness in the simple and the mysterious reversal of roles. A further exploration of Scripture will, however, provide a more balanced, though arguably complex, perspective on power.

Power is certainly not a concept alien to the Bible. It is rather a predominant theme from Creation to Revelation. It emerges with the very conviction of the sovereignty of God. God is all powerful, He is the one whose Word creates (Genesis 1 and John 1), whose chariot moves His authority across the face of the earth, who is above all other powers. He is God the Almighty — power is His name.

The prophetic tradition in Scripture is replete with cognizance of power and appeals to its just use. The prophets appeal for justice in the gate (the local place of adjudication in Hebrew cities), for leaders who administer law without reference to

---

13 See Luke, Chapters 11, 12.
economic privilege. The prophetic judgment is not that there are leaders and persons in power, but that they do not execute their power and leadership with justice and righteousness. Both civil and religious leaders fall into judgement precisely because they have failed to lead, failed to shepherd the sheep (Ezekiel), failed to heal and nurture, failed to give mercy to the poor and orphan. Here there is no anarchism, not even a republic. Power, law, and rule are very clearly a part of the order of the community.

Within the New Testament one is struck with the choice of terminology for its central motifs. The call words, the confessional words of the New Testament such as “Kingdom” and “Jesus is Lord” could hardly have been more poorly chosen if the intent was to dispense with notions of power. To be sure, those terms represented a challenge to existing power, and perhaps a new form of power that was to rule, but they did not dispense with power.

Power is in fact for the Gospel writers one of the signs of Jesus’ Lordship — power over death, disease, and nature. Jesus promises that His followers will receive power, that even hell shall not prevail against them. Likewise, the church lives in an atmosphere of power, the very power of the Resurrection. The church’s power is greater than the world’s, greater than “principalities and powers.” The church is, as Cyril Powell observes, “in the realm of dunamis (power).” In this power the church binds and looses, liberates, proclaims

---

release to captives. It is a power that, as someone observed, "turned the world upside down."

One might also point to the biblical emphasis on "the nations" as the arena of God's work, the missionary-urban strategy of Paul, the models for the governance of the church, Paul's teaching about the state in Romans and the images of the consummation of history in Revelation as indicators of a commitment in Scripture to the legitimacy of the exercise of power.

These perspectives must surely be included along with those of suffering servants in assessing a biblical view of the role of power. The double perspective becomes perhaps symbolized again in the events at the close of Jesus' ministry where He makes the deliberate choice against worldly wisdom of going to the center of power, to Jerusalem, and there in a series of encounters, declares His own authority and the moral bankruptcy of constituted authority about Him. And finally, Pilate, exercising a power bereft of legitimacy symbolized by the washing of his guilty hands in the basin of water, kills Jesus. Jesus proved, however, that such power couldn't hold Him, and in His death came life. Resurrection power was contingent on the crucified lamb, as Paul indicates in the Philippian hymn.

This brief, and surely to a biblical scholar woefully inadequate, summary of some biblical elements that bear on power simply demonstrates the difficulty before us in shaping any rigid, highly defined "biblical" view on power. The paradoxes and enigmas are so pervasive as to require in our analysis a profound humility. With that perspective,
we shall examine three particular biblical stories that may shed some insight on a biblical view of power.

III. Three Biblical Commitments That Inform a Theology of Power

A. The Biblical Understanding of Creation and of Man’s Fall.

No doctrine is more fundamental to a conception of power than is the Judeo-Christian concept of creation. In some ways it is a unique religious concept, firmly rooting faith in corporeality, materiality, history, and culture. It creates, in effect, a “worldly” religion that will not hear of “escapes” to religious life. Though it has its mystics and seers, the heart of the faith in the light of creation has to do with history, with politics, with nations, with people’s acts, and with God’s acts in the historical, verifiable, human process. It has to do with Scythians, Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It insists God is part of this world not as an interloper, a cosmic visitor come to snatch away the obedient or perceptive, but rather as its rightful King, its author, and sustainer.

This conviction that history is the arena of revelation seems to this author to have profound implications for viewing the historical process. Power is part of that history, it is part of creation, God’s creation, and not that of a demigod. As William Stringfellow so powerfully suggests, we deal in biblical religion with no mere myth, ideal, hypothesis of philosophy, but with political reality.¹⁶

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation surely makes the same point of God's commitment to the human process. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John reports in a direct attack on religious systems that see religion as antimaterial. God is deeply involved in flesh, in the world, in the political process. And that means in the world of power.

The creation story does more, however, than merely tell us of God's participation in the historical process. The specific account of the creation of man in the image of God points even more directly to the issue of power and its exercise in mankind. God's image, especially in creation, is supremely one of sovereignty, power, Lordship, and authority exercised in justice, love, and righteousness. In the creation of man in God's image, there is an affirmation of that element of power which is God's character and which now is invested in part in the creation. Authentic personhood in the image of God involves participation in the power which is the Creator's. Guardini puts it directly in stating that "man's natural God-likeness consists in his capacity for power, in his ability to use it in his resultant lordship." The possession of power is in fact of the essence, Guardini argues, of being human, of existing. It is what he refers to as the "ontological aspect of power." Humanity without power is not humanity, for as Karl Rahner indicates, power is "the condition of the possibility of freedom."

---

18 Ibid., p. 11.
Thus perceived, power is an essential humanity-creating gift of God. It is good. As Edgar Brookes insisted, "Power is useful, power is natural, power is of God." It is an inescapable aspect of reality itself. It is, therefore, theologically good though ethically neutral.

Power exists in God's order before the Fall. It is part of that which God creates, observes, and declares, "It is good!" It is part of himself, His shared gift.

This affirmation of the essentiality of power speaks as well to the peculiar tragedy in God's perspective of the powerless. While we are fond of declaring that "power corrupts," it ought to be declared with equal vigor that "helplessness destroys." The culture of powerlessness and the poverty with which it is often, though not always, associated, is a human tragedy. The escapes of the powerless into apathy, violence, and drugs are the price of a society that has not heard God's intent in creation that man not be powerless. The image of God is such that man's dignity and glory require a participation in the power that God distributes. To deny a person that power is to rob him of an aspect of the image of God, and this contributes to "the denigration of self and a sense of worthlessness." 

---

22 Parrent, p. 165.
23 Sample, p. 132.
This empowering of man in creation is given special emphasis in the giving to Adam of "dominion." It is part of the order of creation that those in His image "subdue the earth." God authorizes Adam to name the animals, not because He lacks imagination, but because He desires to give power to Adam, for to give a name is to have power over that name.\textsuperscript{24}

Man is thus to exercise power on behalf of God and in God's name over all the earth. The same notion is perhaps seen in the New Testament charge to the church to exercise Jesus' power through the use of His name. The created people of God do not shrink before the world of power, but rather exercise it as stewards of God, as trustees. Their power is derived. In subduing the earth, it would seem no area of human existence ought to escape the exercise of dominion on behalf of God: education, law, politics, school boards, and sanitary districts are all subject to God's authority. It is our lack of understanding that has allowed the division of the world into the religious and the secular and has sustained the illusion that "religion" is a matter of private belief. The power is over all creation, and it is loaned to His people as a fief. "Man is Lord by the Grace of God."\textsuperscript{25}

The administration of power is part, then, of the task that is given to man in his role as creature and as servant. It is surely not given in order that man may set up an autonomous empire. The source of

\textsuperscript{24}ibid., p. 119.

\textsuperscript{25}Guardini, p. 15.
power in the creation narrative is clearly God. It is exercised by man in finitude and dependence.

The creation account invites man not to withdraw from power, but to exercise it for God, declaring His dominion where it has been usurped — planting the flag of His Kingdom on every continent of human existence. It is part of our witness to His sovereignty.  

Close on the heels of the creation comes the equally critical biblical account of the Fall, the significance of which can hardly be overestimated in a biblical view of man and therefore of power. So central is the concept of the Fall that Stringfellow suggests that the elementary topic of politics is “how to live humanly during the Fall.” Helmut Thielicke likewise senses the dialectic of Creation and Fall in a concept of power when he declares that power “stands between creation on the one side and sin on the other.”

One crucial aspect of the concept of the Fall is its transmutation of so many discussions about the nature of power into discussions about the nature of man, into anthropological questions. Queries about

26 Many Christians seem to have become victims of an inferiority complex. They have learned not to be assertive about their faith or forceful regarding Christian commitments. The notion seems to be that secular man has a right not to be bothered by religious man. It is almost as if Christians had been persuaded that their own faith is an irrelevancy, an opiate, illusion, and myth.

This seems particularly striking in an age when groups are encouraged to press earnestly their views. Minority groups are developing a sense of value and consciousness and group cohesion. They are convinced of the truth of their beliefs and the value of those beliefs for all people. Christians might well learn from such a sense of cohesion, self-worth, and consciousness of their identity.

27 Stringfellow, p. 55.

28 Thielicke, p. 167.
the possible corrupting character of power turn out to be not about power but about mankind. In Pogo's words, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Power's character is shaped by the one who wields it, or as Thielicke expresses it, "[the] demonism of power does not encroach upon man from the outside, but grows entirely out of his own ethical decisions."\(^{29}\)

The Fall not only relocates the issue, it intensifies it, for the Fall is a cosmic tragedy. It speaks of a universal drag. It raises, therefore, the persistent demands for restraints on power, the calls for checks and balances, revolutions and executions. The Fall, seen as rebellion, explains why power is often exercised without a recognition that it is a power on loan. The tragedies of the illegitimate usurpation of power are apparent not only in history, but in the daily chronicles of human life — in the specter of bombs or injections in the hands of obvious tyrants like Idi Amin or of the sanitized (and therefore more danagerous) technocrats or bureaucrats who may wish to dominate us and do good for us. The serpent in the garden has done his work well.

Two particular perversions of power emerge from the Creation-Fall narrative. The first is a perversion in the exercise of power; the second, in the understanding of power.

The perversion in the exercise of power emerges fundamentally out of the denial of the steward relationship with God as a wielder of power. It is the
self-assertive exercise of power where power becomes the goal. It is not seen as a means of ministry, but as an end. It is what Augustine warned of when he spoke of those who seek power merely so that they may have dominion over others, and what Albert H. van den Heuvel spoke of as the "worship of power."

So pervasive is this pattern of usurpation that philosophers and psychologists have spoken of it as if it were the norm. Plato warned of the "tyrant" and his drive for power. Nietzsche baptized the distortion, seeing the "will to power" as built into the physical structure of man so that "the love of power is the demon of mankind" driving us to a "maximum feeling of power." Adler wrote of the "struggle for power" and Adorno of the "authoritarian personality."

This perversion has, however, a self-destructive character about it. It becomes a curse both for those subject to it and those who wield it. As Kenneth Clark observed, "the rewards of power are transitory."

This self-destructive character of abusive power is surely in part generated by the fact that the quest for such power itself emerges out of a fundamental lostness, anxiety, and insecurity — out of a sense of powerlessness that feeds the lust for power. This pathetically fragile human ego's insatiable need for love is simply never satisfied by the quest for power.

30 Discussed in Thielicke, p. 168.
31 Brookes, p. 15.
32 Clark, p. 170.
Power simply, Kenneth Clark suggests, cannot fill our sense of powerlessness. In a section that sounds remarkably biblical and Pauline, Clark writes:

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be human with embarrassment — an embarrassment rooted in the ever-imminent and intolerable insight into the reality of the tenuousness and transitory quality of the all-powerful and at the same time powerless human ego.\(^3\)

Man, unwilling to root himself in God and accept his finitude, ventures to create a God in his own image, which God turns on him and destroys him. The end of this is death, psychological, social, and perhaps even physical. The death is precursed by the very alienation and separation that unbridled power inevitably creates. As Parrent suggests, we are defenseless against our own power, and arrogance ultimately turns its masters into victims.\(^4\) Read Romans!

The perversion is one of hubris, and not in essence of dunamis. It is the self that bears watching.

The second perversion of power is a misunderstanding of its character. Specifically, it is denying that power is of God. It is a refusal to accept the preferred image and the commissioned task. It is the sin of which Harvey Cox wrote in \textit{On Not Leaving It to the Snake} where he argues that the fundamental sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden was not obe-

\(^{3}\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 163.
\(^{4}\) See Parrent and also Sample, p. 120.
dance, but apathy — an unwillingness to take responsibility and instead letting the serpent decide. Thus, Cox's aphorism: "Not to decide is to decide."35

This refusal to accept responsibility for power is immoral in the face of its gift as an occasion for service and for what Rahner calls "freedom." It is a rejection of one of God's gifts, but its consequences reach beyond one's own impoverishment. One avoids power only by giving the decision to another. The flight from power effectively creates a power vacuum and invites others to usurp power not intended to be theirs, creating an imbalance, a distorted mass.

Such a flight may have an initial illusion of innocence about it, for it smacks of avoiding the evil of the world. Such a refusal of power will not, of course, create purity unless one's notion of purity is essentially the absence of something. But even accepting such a limited view of purity as some sort of escape from the taint of the world, Niebuhr's oft-quoted suggestion that man has two choices, purity or involvement, seems particularly appropriate. There is perhaps a taint, at least a risk of infection, that comes with the touch of power. One may get the plague, to use Camus' image. Every incarnation, every ministry risks pollution, pain, risks being numbered with sinners and crucified among thieves.

One is not faithful in a biblical perspective by burying the talents in hopes they shall not be lost. One perhaps at this point hears Luther's admonition

35 Harvey Cox, On Not Leaving It to the Snake.
to "sin boldly," which I take to be an invitation to courageous living, living in the recognition that confession is the milieu of the Christian life. It is the courage to be, and to be faithful and obedient.

**B. The Biblical Understanding of Man as Existing in Community.**

The second major biblical commitment that informs our understanding of power is that of God’s commitment to man as a social being, to his existence in relationship, in community. This intention of God is expressed repeatedly. We come upon it first perhaps in the very nature of God as love and in the heavenly community. We certainly see it in the creation narrative where God observes that "it is not good that man should be alone." It is seen in the biological character of human life as sexual, in the emphasis on "the nations" and in the whole concept of Israel, and the New Israel, the church, the koinonia, the body of Christ. Thus, man is a relational being in community from the basic level of biological existence, through social and political life, and in spiritual community.

Power is an essential element of any relationship. It is a central process of human existence, it is part of the essence of relationships. Though the degree of power and its relationship to other levels and aspects of human existence may vary, power is an element at all levels of human relationships.35 Power may be more transparent and formal

---

in the large social and political group, but is equally real in the church and family.

God's creation of man as a political animal made the exercise of power an inevitable and willed aspect of human existence. As Paul Ramsey indicates, "You never have good politics without power." Ramsey insists on the necessity and legitimacy of power in the political context in spite of what he believes is the unjustified rejection of power factors by Barthians and secular liberalism.37

Paul Tillich affirms the centrality of power in society when he insists power is first and foremost a sociological category, and not a physical one. It has to do with persons in relationships. It is, Tillich insists, the price of creativity.38 Such power in a social context clearly includes the use of force. Edgar Brookes insists that "only a disembodied community could wholly eliminate bodily force."39

The very centrality of community in God's order not only suggests the inevitability and legitimacy of power, but also suggests some elements of illegitimate power, abuses of power.40

Foremost of the abuses that a valid concept of community points to is the danger of power exercised without reference to the community and, particularly the persons for whom the community

38 Tillich, pp. 45-48, 91-106.
39 Brookes, p. 7.
40 Buber argues that biblical leaders are in a sense not at all a part of the community. He speaks of them as "cut off from their community, fighting with it, becoming utterly alone in the midst of the people." (Buber, p. 149).
exists. Community is a human category, persons are of its essence. Even as the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath, so the community in its structures, traditions, and corporate identity exists for its people, even though it is, of course, bigger than its people. Persons precede community in Creation. To be sure, Hebrew culture saw the community as perhaps the fundamental social entity rather than the family or person. It was certainly through the community one had one's identity, even as it is in the church. But the personal reference was evident throughout the writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel where no longer does the saying, "The Fathers have eaten grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" rule.

A fundamental perversion of power occurs when power loses its relationship to the essential humanity of the life of the community — its people. Thus, many corruptions of power are what Haroutunian called “anti-community,” a settled resistance to the common good, and “a treachery of one man toward another.”

Christians have been slow to recognize the role, both positive and negative, of structures and institutions in our society. Evangelical Christians in parti-

---

41 Community is, of course, in many ways bigger than persons, and not only do individuals create community, but communities give their identity to people. This was true of the New Testament church, which was the place of identity and being.

42 One could argue contrarily that community precedes personhood since community gives identity to individuality, bears the culture and ethos. Even in sexuality, community precedes individuality. However, the state as an institution certainly does not precede community, nor create identity.

43 Haroutunian, p. 85.
cular have focused so exclusively on personal salvation that they have been blind to both the salvific and demonic aspects of institutions, structures, cultures, and other aspects of man's corporate life.

Institutions have always been a major aspect of our existence, but in modern society seem to be pervasive. So large and omnipresent are such structures and entities that it has been suggested they tend to develop an ethos and value system, a type of subculture, of their own. They make a truth of what was once merely a legal fiction, namely, that the corporation is a person (personality!). These institutional and corporate aspects of life include not only the frequently pilloried "multinational" corporations and government agencies, but less formal collections of influence, interests, bureaucracies, and pressure groups.

The problem so often with power as it is exercised in the context of such groups is its loss of reference to either the community qua community or to persons. Without such a reference to persons in terms of both the objects and wielders of power, conscience is at best diluted. The world, to use Martin Buber's terminology, becomes "I-it" rather than "I-thou." Power flows without regard to humanity, personality, or individuality. Guardini suggests that power in such a context where there is no "appealable will," and "no person answerable" is particularly ominous.

The particular tragedy of the power wielders in

44 Sample, p. 120. See also Jacques Ellul's, The Technological Society.
45 Guardini, p. 7.
such a context is that they themselves become such a part of the systemic ethos that they are unable to effectively characterize their actions in a moral frame of reference. Stringfellow spoke of such persons as "entrapped in tradition . . . fascinated by institutional machinations . . . in bondage to the curse of preserving the principality oblivious to the consequences and costs for other human beings or themselves."\textsuperscript{46} Such persons have, Stringfellow went on, an arrested moral development that left them "bereft of conscience."

Our world seems particularly vulnerable to this kind of depersonalized exercise of power, often aimed at little more than the preservation of the structures or systems. It is of the essence of Ken Kesey's tragic picture in \textit{One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest} and Orwellian visions of \textit{1984}.

The ever-increasing depersonalization of life, and growth of elements that seem counter to community in both business and government place an increasingly heavy burden on those aspects of personal power that still exist. To counter the dehumanizing power of "principalities and powers" seems an overwhelming task. It is particularly demonic in that the larger writ these structures and values and systems are in our culture, the more difficult it is for us to even become aware of the values shaping the flow of power and its consequences. To use the imagery of Romans, they become part of our "conforming to this world" about which Paul insists we need a radical reorientation of our mind, a mental

\textsuperscript{46} Stringfellow, p. 30.
metamorphosis.\textsuperscript{47} Absent such, history shows us how easily a whole culture loses its life in its own illusions. Nazi Germany comes to mind, but is so popular and such an apparent illustration we are in danger of falling to recognize elements in our own society that show evidence of an equal delusion and lie about human life and the purpose of existence.

A further element of danger in power that is without reference to the community and its persons is that it is a power which may exist without any means of authentication or legitimization. It is not earned, voted, accountable, reviewed, or judged. It simply is. Its self-authenticating claim may be a fundamental denial of power's relationship to community and persons.

The biblical concept of man in community also suggests that an aspect of legitimate power exercised in the context of community is that there is to be a distributive aspect to power, a dispersion of power. Power in God's order is to be a community power, a shared power, shared by all the co-creators with God, the co-possessors of the image of God given the task of dominion.\textsuperscript{48}

Not only is the distribution of power a consequence of a positive affirmation of the world of the individual as a creation of God, but is also an anthropological statement about the impact of the Fall on mankind. Thielicke expressed it thusly: "the

\textsuperscript{47} The biblical word for repentance does not mean what it has popularly come to stand for — feeling sorry, an emotional experience of contrition. It means rather a changing of the mind, a reorientation of one's very perception of reality.

\textsuperscript{48} Sample, p. 119.
distribution of power is an institutional expression of an abiding mistrust of power, or rather of the people in power. Thielicke, p. 218. Restating the same principle later he declared the concept of distributive power may be stated anthropologically as: “Man must be protected against himself.”

Such a concept does not necessarily lead to democracy or notions of equal distribution of each type of power. Such notions are not essentially biblical. There is, however, the concept of reciprocal negotiation, and the division of powers within the community. The same principles gain expression in our own society in such concepts as representation, delegation and chiefly, “balance of powers.” Such a balance is essential if justice is not simply to become the will of the strongest.

A second warning that emerges from the biblical concept of community is that there must be a sense of accountability to the community for the exercise of power that takes place among it. It seems absolutely essential that those who exercise power be held accountable to both God and man. This has a special and powerful reference, I would urge, for the role of the Christian community — the Church.

The body of Christ ought to play a very special and central role in regard to the exercise of power not only within it, but by those who are a part of it. The Church rightly understood and functioning may

---

49 Thielicke, p. 218.
50 Ibid., p. 230.
51 See Sample for a discussion of these themes and Niebuhr for thoughts in regard to justice and the balancing of power.
be a special place of accountability for those who find themselves in positions of substantial influence and authority. It is in the Church that such persons might find a place of confession, judgment, and renewal. It is in the body of believers that a place of radical honesty and openness before God and His people can be nurtured — where one can be shorn of the trappings and illusions of power. Worship, in recognition of both our glory and our vulnerability, could restore. The body ought to be a place of tough encounter, probing and supporting. All of this, of course, assumes a level of community intensity and integrity and mutuality that are more eschatological vision than reality. There is, however, an increasing recognition in the church that it is being called to a reawakening of its nature as a community of faith under the Lordship of Christ, called to Christ and to one another.

C. The Purposive Character of Human Existence.

A third major theme of Scripture is the purposive or missional character of God's intent for His people. To a certain extent this is simply a continuation or an aspect of the dominion and stewardship concepts to which we have pointed in the Creation account. This theme, however, emerges with special emphasis in the biblical teaching concerning the formation of the people of Israel and the creation of the Church.

Israel is a called people. That call is not only that Israel be something, but its people be something for
a purpose, for a mission. His people are to be a redemptive community. Abraham is called not only that he might be blessed, but that through him, all the nations of the world might be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Israel's call is distorted when she believes she is to hoard her chosenness, rather than see it as instrumental.

The same is true of the Church. She, too, is chosen, called, blessed, informed, and empowered (Ephesians 1). Her empowerment, however, is for ministry. She is sent from the upper room of worship into the city of service and ministry. In inner and external life she is marked by service and diaconia. The great commission of Matthew 28 is her charter. Through the Spirit she will be informed and empowered for the work of ministry.

We have already noted the association of power with the commission to "have dominion" and "subdue the earth." The same is surely true of the role of power and the mission of human life as intended by God. The purposive character of human life in God's order requires power. Tex Sample insists that "to be without power is to be without the capacity to bear history." Guardini states the matter directly: "To the essence of power as a specifically human phenomenon belongs its ability to give purpose to things." Power is the ability of mankind to give direction to life, to shape ambiguity. It is that which moves toward fulfillment. Power without purpose is a dangerous distortion of God's will for power.

---

52 Sample, p. 119.
53 Guardini, p. 3.
“Power awaits direction.”\textsuperscript{54} This is true at every level of human life. Paul Ramsey makes the same point in regard to political structures when he declares, “power and purpose combined equal politics.”\textsuperscript{55}

It is certainly clear that there is great potential for evil in the notion that power is associated with a sense of mission or purpose. Nothing is perhaps more demonic than the combination of power and someone on a mission. The tragedies of such are well recorded. There is no shortage of political and religious demagogues who hoard power and build their kingdoms around some myth. We must recognize the danger of this distortion of a central truth. We must know how to distinguish the neurotic and demonic counterfeits from the godly and true.

This concept of the mission and purpose of human existence and of the church raises perhaps one of the classic problems; namely, that of the relationship between power and love. Love is certainly a, if not the, sign of the mission. It is a means, and end, a process, and a content of the purpose of human existence. The question then arises, What is the relation between love and power? Are they in conflict? Complementary? Is one for personal relations and the other for societal and political entities? Is one a concession to the Fall?

Thielicke seems fundamentally correct in insisting that though power and love may not be capable of being joined in a full synthesis, they nevertheless

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{55}Ramsey, p. 8.
are not mutually exclusive categories.\textsuperscript{56} Tillich would go even further and suggests that "love is the foundation, not the negation of power."\textsuperscript{57}

Love and power find their unity, their common work, precisely at the point of our purposive activity. Love, when it emerges from a conception of mere emotion or ethics, is not antithetical to power. Love, in fact, requires power to get its work done, a work that sometimes involves the destruction of that which is an enemy of love.\textsuperscript{58} Paul Ramsey is particularly critical of liberalism for its myth that the good and right may always be accomplished without the exercise of power and force, even violence.\textsuperscript{59} Allen Parrent makes precisely the same point in arguing that in the historical setting in which love must do its work, a historical setting marked by alienation and estrangement, love must be involved with the exercise of power to do its liberating and reconciling work.\textsuperscript{60} Far from seeking to avoid, eliminate, or transcend power, love, Parrent argues, is obligated to use power as a countervailing force to destructive, dehumanizing, and disintegrating powers.

Power may, then, in part, be tested by its relationship to purpose. The purpose, or end, will not, however, be the only test of power, even in relation to its purposive work. A proper perspective will also

\textsuperscript{56}See Thielicke.
\textsuperscript{57}Tillich, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., pp. 12, 49-50.
\textsuperscript{59}Ramsey.
\textsuperscript{60}Parrent, p. 163.
require a careful examination of the means power uses to achieve the mission. In a striking suggestion by George Kennan, he indicates that in fact method may be a more fundamental inquiry than ultimate purpose. Writing in the Atlantic Monthly he suggested that "questions of method in foreign policy seem to me to be generally a much more fitting subject of Christian concern than questions of purpose." This is so, he indicated, because purpose is elusive. We often know little about our real purposes. But while, speaking of the government, we cannot know fully what we are doing, "it (government) can always know how it is doing it . . . and it can be as sure that good methods will be in some ways useful as that bad ones will be in some way pernicious."

While Kennan's suggestion may in some way amount to little more than the point that ends do not justify means, his perception regarding our special clarity about means seems appropriate. It certainly is a careful check on power that may be in deed purposive, but which in method is illegitimate.

Parrent interestingly adds a third category to the usual means-and-ends tests, and that is the test of consequences. These may be quite different from purposes. But in addition to that which power may purpose, it may in fact lead to whole clusters of consequences that render it evil. Such consequences also subject the power utilized to moral scrutiny.

---

Conclusion

Where has our attempt to develop a theology of power taken us? Certainly not to an unabashed glorification of the human capacity for authority and power. Nor to any easy rules for assessing power's legitimacy, scope, or abuse.

We have sought to establish that power is not an element of human experience from which the Christian necessarily must flee because it is evil, or only some condescension to frail and sinful human nature. We have insisted that Scripture affirms power, gives power to humanity in creation, expects its crucial dynamic in human relations, and contemplates its flow in achieving God's purposes through His people. We have also sought to recognize the perversions of power. The most dangerous of these distortions are, of course, those that seem so close to the genuine, that only deviate in small, almost imperceptible ways. And ours is an age fraught with potential for, and the present exercise of, power that bears little relation to the biblical view we have sought to sketch. So tragic and total is the abuse of power that Kenneth Clark can only hope for an evolution in the brain and a breakthrough in the technology of psychology to save us from the "pathos of power." Such a hope seems as comic as it is tragic.

A biblical view while not for a moment failing to recognize the human capacity for evil, insists on the redemptive possibilities in Jesus Christ and through His people. The will of God combined with His redemption and empowering of His people offers the hope that some who hear Him may not only understand the power given them, but live with it within
the purposes and limits of God's will for mankind in a world of power.

Guardini, whom we quoted at the opening of this paper as suggesting the centrality of the power issue for modern man, points with equal force to the choice that is before man. It is a choice, he writes,

to match the greatness of his power with the strength of his humanity, or to surrender his humanity to power and perish.\textsuperscript{62}

He is correct in suggesting the solution lies not in the extinction of power, or even essentially in its diminution, but in its exercise by a humanity that knows both cognitively and existentially the biblical word.

\textsuperscript{62}Guardini.