

Confronting The Powers

Series on Acts

Several years ago now, a committee of the Uniting Church in Australia decided that any imagery of warfare was inappropriate for a church concerned with peace. They decided to do away with any language connected with warfare. So great old hymns like "Fight the good fight with all thy might" and "A mighty fortress is our God" were banned, as were any songs connected with spiritual warfare. I don't know what this committee has done with passages of scripture like Ephesians 6:10 – 20, which is very explicit about the fact that Christians are in a warfare situation with the evil one. I don't know what they make of the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel **"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it". (Matthew 11:12)** Jesus talked about two kingdoms. The kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of light. He spoke of the devil as an adversary. His life on earth was an ongoing and relentless battle with the devil and his angels. When he healed a sick person, or preached the good news of the gospel, or confronted the power of religious leaders, or set a person free from evil spirits, he described those confrontations as a clash between his Kingdom, and the kingdoms of this world. He saw power as either coming from God, or coming from the evil one.

The first 25 verses of Acts Chapter 8 contain three situations where the issue of power and control had to be addressed if the gospel was to advance. One situation is quite obvious. The others are a bit more subtle. Here is the first.

1. Confronting The Power Of The Status Quo

In Acts Chapter 6, we saw that the Greek speaking Jews in the Jerusalem church chose Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas to wait on tables and to look after the Greek speaking widows in the church. The Apostles laid hands on this second generation of leaders and appointed them as leaders in the church. Their job was to administer the distribution of food to the widows. In other words, it was an administration job. I wonder if the Apostles knew what they were getting. What they got were a bunch of fired up Spirit filled young men who did much more than look after the widows in the church. It wasn't long before Stephen was out on the streets doing great signs and wonders in Jesus name. That brought him into direct conflict with the Jewish authorities. His speech to the Sanhedrin got them so mad they were grinding their teeth, covering their ears and yelling at him. Such was the spiritual conflict, they had him stoned to death. Stephen's death unleashed a ferocious wave of persecution on the church that resulted in most of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem running for their lives. Listen to Luke's description in Acts 8.

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went". (Acts 8:1-4)

When the Apostles appointed these new leaders, I suspect many of them thought they were getting a bunch of quiet administrators, who would serve the widows and wait on tables during meals. People who would do deacons work. What they got were a bunch of fired up young leaders who were full of the Spirit, full of wisdom and full of faith.

What they got was a man who wasn't afraid to provoke a power confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Yet, as it turned out, appointing new leaders who stirred things up was the best thing that happened to the Jerusalem church. If Stephen hadn't stirred up trouble, the church would have remained a quiet little Jewish sect in Jerusalem. God needed to put a bomb under those Christians to get them out into the world to share the gospel. And the bomb was persecution. God has his ways of doing things that are not our ways. Even though he wasn't a follower of Jesus yet, God was using Saul, the persecutor of the church, to get the church out into the world. He used Stephen to light the fuse that caused the explosion.

Before I came to Westlake, I was doing consultancy work in some churches. One issue that surfaced in many different churches was an unwillingness of older leaders to empower young leaders. Organists who became so possessive of the church organ that no one else but them was allowed to touch it. People who had run ministries for so long it became their little kingdom. Many of them agreed in theory that younger leaders should be given responsibility, but when it came to letting go, they just couldn't do it. Why was that? Because letting go means I'm no longer in control. Letting go is risky, because these young leaders might mess up what I've taken all my life to create. Letting go is difficult because young leaders do things differently, and I want it done my way. Young leaders tend to light fuses that blow things up. They challenge the status quo. It's interesting that from this point on in the book of Acts, it's not the Apostles that feature so much, but a new breed of leaders, a second generation of leaders, who reach out to the world in mission. There is an important role for the Apostles, but I'll come to that in a minute.

2. Confronting Power Of Prejudice

The next part of this scripture concerns the Samaritans. The Jews hated the Samaritans. As far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were heretics. Historically, the Samaritans grew out of the remnant left behind when the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon. They intermarried with foreigners who had settled in the places left by those taken captive. So the Samaritans were half breeds, who failed to practice true Judaism. What made matters worse was that on Mt Gerazim, they set up a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem. The Jewish scriptures prohibited setting up another temple, so the Samaritans rejected all the Jewish scriptures except the first five books. Can you see now why the Jews hated them so much? These people had intermarried with pagans. They had set up an alternative worship place, and they rejected a large part of the Jewish scriptures. Such was the hatred between Jews and Samaritans that Jews would detour right around their territory rather than meet one of them. And the feeling was mutual. The Samaritans hated the Jews too.

Here's the next part of Acts 8.

"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city". (Acts 8:5 – 8)

Philip is another of these Spirit filled firebrand young leaders. Pushed out of Jerusalem by the persecution, he did the unthinkable. He took the gospel to the Samaritans! Can you believe it? I can imagine the Apostles having a meeting back in Jerusalem, muttering about these young hothead Christians. Stephen lights a fuse that causes huge trouble for the church.

Through his radical and outrageous preaching, the whole church in Jerusalem is now being persecuted. These young guys get us into so much trouble! And now Philip has gone off to the Samaritans to preach about Jesus. Why couldn't he have found some nice quiet Jewish people to preach to? Why does he have to go to the Samaritans? Why do these young guys have to do such radical things? The Samaritans of all people!

Imagine if we had a several thousand Mormons living in a commune not far out of Nyon, and we heard that Soul Magura and a group of young adults were preaching Christ and working miracles there, and that many of these people were believing the gospel and trusting Christ. What if we had reports that amazing things were happening to these Mormons, who have twisted and corrupted true Christian teaching. Don't you think we would want the Elders to investigate? That's what the Apostles did. ***"When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them."* (Acts 8:14)** I'm sure that the Apostles first had to get over their prejudices about Samaritans. The last time James and John had contact with Samaritans, they asked Jesus for permission to call down fire from heaven on them. They wanted to nuke them. Can you imagine what was going through John's mind when he hears that Samaritans are turning to Christ?

People, when we talk about spiritual warfare against the works of the evil one, it's not all warfare out there. Some of the warfare that has to happen is against our own prejudices. When we talk about confronting the powers, some of the strongholds are in our own minds about the way God can work. We are more like those first Jewish believers than we want to acknowledge. We are shaped by years of history and tradition and prejudice. We have this framework that says "This is the way it should be done". That's why we need to be trusting a new generation of younger leaders, who sometimes see opportunities and possibilities we haven't seen before. Fortunately, Peter and John were big enough to be able to see that this was God at work. And they blessed what was happening. That became the pattern for the Apostles from then on. They watched what God was doing, gave direction to it, and blessed it. It's a great model for leadership. To release a younger generation into new ventures. To be permission giving. To trust young leaders and bless what they are doing.

3. Confronting The Power Of The Counterfeit

Most of the rest of this Chapter is taken up with Simon the Magician. I don't have time to read it all this evening, so let me give you the basics. Simon had practiced sorcery in the city for so long, and had been so successful; he had built up quite a following. People called him "The Great Power". They began to see him as god, and there are indications he saw himself that way too. When he saw the power of God working miracles through Philip, he professed belief and was baptized, and followed Philip everywhere. Now he might have said the right things, and done the right thing by being baptized, but there was something in his heart that hadn't been changed. Simon wanted this power for himself and so he tried to buy the power of the Spirit with money.

Historians tell us that that Simons reputation was so great, people used to travel all the way from Rome to be treated by him. There was no doubt that he had power. Lots of people were convinced that his power came from God, because it worked. But the power Simon was tapping in to was a counterfeit power. Understand this people. The devil is a master at counterfeiting what God does. Can people receive physical healing through demonic power? Yes they can. But any healing that comes through the wrong power source is never cheap.

When Jesus heals, there is physical wholeness, spiritual wholeness, and freedom. When Satan heals, there may be temporary physical relief, but there is spiritual disintegration and spiritual bondage.

Not long after I started as Pastor of one church I discovered that one of the church Elders was a practicing colour therapist. He had quite a money making business treating people for all sorts of illnesses and ailments. The way he used to diagnose those that came to him was by using a pendulum, which he would pass over the patient's body, and when the pendulum began to swing violently, he felt this was God showing his power. Quite a number of people from the church were being treated by him. That rang alarm bells for me, because we had previously dealt with people in occult practices who used pendulums. One day I visited a woman in our church who had been quite sick. When we got talking about her spiritual life, she became quite agitated. Then she revealed that since she had been dabbling in this stuff she had been quite confused spiritually. She hadn't been able to read her bible or pray.

We finished our time together with her renouncing her involvement, and from then on, she began to grow spiritually, and get better physically. After a lot of prayer I confronted the Elder about what he was doing. He said "But God is using me as a healer. I have people coming to me from all over the country, and ringing me from all over the world". He used to diagnose people over the phone too. So I challenged him to throw away his pendulum, and do the scriptural thing, laying hands on people and pray for their healing. He said "I can't do without my pendulum".

This evening I want to bring you a pastoral warning about alternative healing techniques and alternative medicines. Not every alternative healing technique draws on Satanic power, but quite a few of them do. There are too many Christians who are jumping into this stuff and not asking the right questions. Some of them are reasoning that because it works, it must be OK. Just because it works, doesn't mean it's OK. When I confronted this colour therapist, it created an angry storm in the church. I had a very angry woman say to me "Well, you would go to the devil for healing if you knew it worked wouldn't you?" The question we need to ask is this. Where does the power come from? If you are involved in some form of alternative therapy that draws on supernatural power, ask yourself "Where does the power come from?" There is more than one power source in the spiritual realm, and if we dabble with the wrong one, we may find a form of physical healing, but the cost to our spiritual life will be catastrophic. There is a war going on in the heavenly places over your soul. Jesus said "***The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full***". (**John 10:10**) The devil will do he all he can to steal your heart, your hope and your happiness. Confront the powers that seek to destroy all that is good and embrace the life that Jesus gives you, and hold on to it tightly.

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