

CHAPTER SIX

According to the Power

Pastor Johnson leaned against the fender of the fire-truck, watching helplessly as the church building burned to the ground. The firemen continued battling the flames, but it was clear that the flames were winning. Just then, Mrs. Wimple, one of Pastor Johnson's Easter-only parishioners, came up to him, shaking her head sadly. "Oh, Pastor Johnson," she said sympathetically, "it's just awful! It doesn't look like they'll be able to save any of it!"

"No," Pastor Johnson sighed. "It's a total loss for sure. By the way, Mrs. Wimple, I usually only see you at church once a year! What brings you out here tonight?"

"Well," she said, spreading her hands, "this is the first time I've ever seen the church on fire!"

In this chapter, we will look at how to set a church "on fire" all year round, so that it will illuminate the world, drawing people out of their darkness and toward the light of Jesus Christ. An "on-fire" church is a church that is plugged into a source of power. What is that power source? And how does an "on fire," fully powered church function?

Is it a place where dramatic miracles happen every Sunday? Is it a center of political pressure, changing society by the power of its numbers, marching in lock step? Is it a center of political activism, demanding change through protests and marches? Is it a religious think-tank, performing studies and issuing papers and resolutions in the hope that society will listen and change?

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians talks a lot about the power which resides in the church--yet he never mentions any of these activities. Instead, he reminds us that the fundamental secret of the operation of the church is that each true Christian has a gift and is expected to operate that gift or cluster of gifts in the power provided by Jesus Christ. This is the way he puts it:

"But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things)." (Eph. 4:7-10).

Now, there are two kinds of gifts mentioned in verse 7. One, Paul calls the measure of the other: "But grace (that is the first gift) was given to each of us, according to the measure of Christ's gift" (or more literally, the gift of Christ--the second gift). This "gift of Christ" is the more basic gift of the two and refers to Christ himself. That is, Paul is not talking here about something which Christ gives to us, but something God has given us, which is Christ. The gift is Christ himself. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!"

Because Christ is made known to us by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it is equally proper to call this the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Peter does in Acts 2:38: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

So the basic gift is the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ within each believer. That is what makes anyone a Christian. Paul says to the Romans, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him"

(Rom. 8:9). He may be religious and a member of church, faithfully attending all meetings and fulfilling all obligations, but if he does not have the Spirit living within he is not one of Christ's. That is the essential requirement.

There is also the special "grace" mentioned here which is the gift of the Spirit to each Christian as a special ability or capacity for service. We have examined these in detail. It is this gift (or cluster of gifts) which must be exercised "according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Christ's triumphal march

In Eph. 4:8-10, the apostle ties the *gift* of Christ to the *ascension* of Christ and His previous descent to earth. He writes, "Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'"--there, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18, then he continues--"(In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things)." In this passage, Paul seems to put great emphasis on Christ's triumphal march, leading a host of captives into heaven. What is Paul saying?

It is obvious that the quotation from Psalm 68 is intended to amplify and explain the phrase, "according to the measure of the gift of Christ." A gift is one thing, the power to use it is quite another. Now Paul is bringing the gift and the power together. Graces or gifts, he says, are given to us to use according to the measure of power available to us. And that power is the life of a risen and enthroned Lord, living within us by means of His Spirit.

Now we have to ask ourselves, "What kind of power do we need to operate the gifts God has given us?" Some people think we need the power of a strong personality in order to use our spiritual gifts. Many Christians who do not have a strong personality--who are shy or quiet by nature--neglect the gifts God has given them because they think, "Oh, I wish I had an extroverted personality, so God could use me, but I'm just not outgoing enough to exercise spiritual gifts." But if the power we need to use our spiritual gifts is the power of an outgoing personality, then clearly there are many who will never have a chance to serve God with their gifts!

Well, is it the power of positive thinking that is required? We read much about this "power" today. Motivational books, tapes, infomercials, and seminars have never been more popular than they are today. Do we need develop and energize our inner attitudes in such a way that we are always thinking positively so that we can become useful to Jesus Christ? If that is the kind of "power" we need, then it is clear we can not be useful to God if we are sad, grieving, depressed, or suffering--and that is simply not true! The fact is, positive thinking is nothing more than wishful thinking if the facts of a situation are contrary to what we desire. While it's good to be optimistic, our optimism must be rooted in truth in order to be of any use at all.

Well, then, maybe the "power" we need to exercise spiritual gifts is the power of a keen intellect. If we have a well-trained, well-educated mind, honed to the highest degree by the resources of modern knowledge, then we will be empowered to use our spiritual gifts, right? But if that's true, then what about all the people who have a limited IQ or limited education? Has God shut them out of being able to access the gifts and graces of the Spirit of God? Preposterous! The biblical teaching on spiritual gifts makes it clear that these gifts are for everyone in the body of Christ, not just an elite few.

Clearly, the power to exercise our spiritual gifts must be a different kind of power than any of the "powers" we have just examined. It must be a power that is superior to all circumstances. We need a kind of power that is not dependent upon personality, emotions, moods, intelligence, or education. We need a kind of power that is available to all Christians, in all circumstances, at all times.

That is precisely the kind of power the apostle Paul refers to when he speaks of the ascension and triumphal appearance of Christ before the throne of God that he might give gifts to men. It is the power of a risen Lord, the power of resurrection! Paul deeply desired this kind of power for himself. As he cries out in his Philippian letter, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10). Because of the descent of Christ to earth (his incarnation), and his ascent again to the throne of power after his resurrection, that remarkable

power is now available to *all* Christians!

It took His descent from glory down to this earth--with all the pain and anguish of the cross, plus His resurrection from the dead and His an ascension in triumph to receive gifts from the Father--before it was possible for Him to give those gifts to you. Remember, a spiritual gift is no common thing. As we have seen, it is not merely a natural talent. It is divinely given ability requiring resurrection power to exercise it. The gifts, therefore, which Christ has given you are the most precious gifts you could ever have.

Plugged into the source

Spiritual gifts can be compared to electrical appliances. Think of the variety of appliances you can buy today: lamps, electric toasters, electric toothbrushes, electric razors, microwave ovens, dishwashers, food processors, bread machines, stereos, TVs, VCRs, home computers, and on and on and on! In fact, I once saw an advertisement for an electric shoestring tying machine! All of these appliances have different functions, yet they all have one thing in common: a cord with a plug at the end. They are all designed to utilize the same power!

Do they use this power in the same way and to the same extent? No! Each appliance uses its own specific amount of power. Some are 20 watt appliances, some are 1,000 watt appliances. Some use 220 volts, others 110 volts. Some use alternating current, some have transformers built into them which convert house current to 12 volt direct current. The power usage of each appliance is usually stamped on the back or underside of the appliance. In other words, to paraphrase Ephesians 4:7, appliances are given to us according to the measure of the power available.

The early Christians knew the secret of living by resurrection power and nothing else will account for the amazing effect they had upon the world of their day. They did not try to borrow power from the world, for they found they had all they could possibly need, available continuously from a risen, triumphant Lord. That is why Paul writes in Ephesians 3:20,21, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think ... be glory in the church."

Paul claims this power for himself as well: "Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace"--the grace, or spiritual gift given to him--"which was given me by the working of his power" (Eph. 3:7). The only limit the apostle ever found to this resurrection power was the limit of his faith to receive it. As faith grew his effectiveness grew. He did not always see the results himself but he trusted God to produce the results, because for resurrection power can never fail.

Like no other

Resurrection power is like no other power on earth. It is unique, and has no possible rival. It is a power that operates in the midst of death and despair. It operates when the entire world seems, bleak, dead, and barren. It explodes into life and light in the midst of an empty, dark cemetery--for that is where it was first demonstrated. When Jesus Christ was resurrected, He came out from among the dead. So if you learn to live by resurrection power, you can experience life, hope, and vitality when everything and everyone around you is dead, hopeless, and lifeless.

Resurrection power is a "stealth" power--silent and invisible. It makes no sound, it operates below the radar scope of this world. Other forms of power are noisy and obvious--they pound, pulsate, throb, hum, roar, buzz, or explode. But resurrection power is silent. It accomplishes its purpose without ostentation, flash, pizzazz, or neon lights. Christians who live by resurrection power don't use it to dazzle others or advertise its affects. That's why the distinguishing marks of Christian character are humility and servanthood rather than showiness. Genuine Christians demonstrate the reality of resurrection power through the quiet evidence of their lives: love, joy, peace, endurance under hardships, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

God has a marvelous way of illustrating spiritual truth through nature. He demonstrates His resurrection power every year through every returning springtime. Out of the cold, barren, death of winter, God brings

new life, color, warmth, and glory by means of a quiet, invisible force which gradually transforms the whole landscape into a fairyland of beauty.

Resurrection power is irresistible. It cannot be thwarted or turned aside. It takes absolutely no account of any obstacles thrown in its path, except to use them for further opportunities to advance its cause. When Jesus came bursting from the grave, He didn't give the slightest attention to the obstacles man had placed in His way. There was a large stone in front of His tomb; He passed right through it. He was wrapped in yard after yard of linen cloth; He left the graveclothes undisturbed behind Him. There were Roman guards in front of His tomb; He ignored them. He took not the slightest notice of the decrees of Caesar or the orders of Pilate or the fulminations of the Jewish priests.

From his imprisonment in Rome, Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Phil. 1:12,13). Every effort being made to stop the Gospel was really advancing it. Because Paul had learned to depend on the power of Christ's resurrection, he was not in the least disturbed by apparent setbacks. He did not rely upon his own cleverness or upon the influence and intervention of others, but solely upon the ability of a risen Lord to bring about His will in spite of deliberate human attempts to nullify it.

Resurrection power needs no props or support. It does not borrow from any other source, though it uses other forms of power as its instrument. It does not even require a cup of coffee to get started in the morning! There is absolutely nothing else like it anywhere in the universe.

Available by faith

Resurrection power is available to every true Christian by faith. What is faith? It could well be defined as "a human response to a divine promise." Faith is a sense of expectation, a quiet trust that another person will do exactly as he said he would do. The Bible tells us that Abraham "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised" (Rom. 4:20,21).

Many people think that faith has something to do with feelings. "I don't feel like I have faith," they say. But faith has nothing to do with feelings, and takes no account of moods or physical conditions. Feelings come and go, rise and fall, but faith endures and perseveres, because it does not look to any human source for help. The object of faith is God alone.

The Christian, who believes that a risen Jesus Christ now lives within, confidently expects Christ to work through him or her, adding His divine "plus" that marks the presence of resurrection power. Christ will not necessarily be "felt" in an emotional way, but He will be present. He will make ordinary words and actions produce extraordinary results. He will take common relationships and transform them into uncommon accomplishments. He will do exactly as He promised: "exceeding abundantly above all that is asked or thought" [Eph. 3:20]--not according to man's time schedule but according to God's.

Surely this is the missing note in today's church activity. The church is still the church, still the body of Christ, but it has been brainwashed by the world to the point that it has forgotten the divine provision for reaching the world. The church will never again affect the world as it did in the first century until individual Christians begin to utilize the gifts God has given them in the power of the resurrected Lord. This should be the most important thing in the world to all of us as Christians--more important than our standard of living, our worldly success, our desire to travel or find romance or be entertained or anything else.

Paul puts the case clearly in Romans 13: "The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:12-14).

In the next chapter we shall learn just how pastors and other church leaders fit into this divine provision for the operation of Christ's body, the church. Be prepared for some surprises!

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