

## Chapter 9

### Power

Introduction: Power has been in my vocabulary for as long as I can remember. Looking back, I realized that the one word was used in a variety of ways, depending on the context. The town where I grew up was built around the intersection of two main railroad lines. The intersection was established on the west central side of the several street business district, which meant/means that, no matter which way one entered or exited the main business area, there possibly was a several minute wait for a long train to pass.

I learned to count early on as my parents coached me to count the number of cars. Power came into the discussion as I was taught to notice how many engines were being used to pull the freight cars. And, eventually, as I noticed driving and wanting to drive myself moved to the matter of how much power was in the respective vehicles we saw every day.

By the time I was in high school, the matter of “muscle cars” was a thing. All of that era was before the issues of gas rationing, mileage ratios—the bigger the engine, the lower the mileage, the more gasoline burned—and well before attention began to be drawn to how much vehicle exhaust was affecting the atmosphere.

Power had an individual application, too, as maybe the specific term was not used, but at least the attention given to how much force was needed to dig a post hole, lift and place a bale of hay. One of my uncles displayed his hand strength by squeezing a bathroom scale to, for me, an unbelievable number. The point was how much he could lift, hold, move with hand, arm, strength.

Interestingly, in his middle age years he had a series of serious back surgeries to correct some of the overload on his spine. Evidently back muscles and hand muscles didn't have comparable power. And, strangely, he had not learned from his father, my maternal grandfather, how to lift. That grandfather taught me some basic physics—the lever, fulcrum principle—before I knew how these principles are built into human anatomy.

And, he added on the use of a digging bar. One of these would be a steel/iron rod four to five feet long, heavier on one end. Where I grew up those were used in the coal mines nearby, as well as working on railroad rails and cross ties. They were enormously helpful to pry large rocks out of the ground to be used in all manner of capacities.

It was Archimedes, a genius who lived in the third century BC in Syracuse on the east side of Sicily, who said, “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, a place to stand, and I shall move the world.” The statement becomes more acceptable as one investigates the many inventions from him, using principles that remain effective into the twenty-first century.

The physical power, strength, of individuals was multiplied in the development of building structures, like temples and tombs. The puzzlement about how the rocks which apparently came

from Wales end up in southern England and formed Stonehenge, has been worked out a bit by considering how many people were involved in the cutting and movement of the rocks—slowly but steadily. People power—physically moving before anything more than simple machines had been invented.

Not until I got into my college major-minor of Natural Science did I begin to put further detail to the idea of power, especially horsepower. It was through the avenue of taking note of the development over the millennia and then recent centuries of mechanical power that some intellectual understanding of power converged. Though, some steam powered mechanisms can be traced back to the First Century AD.

I was surprised to learn that it was not until the early 1700s that real attention was given to a more efficient engine powered by steam. It paved the way to having the Industrial Revolution. It was James Watts, in England, in the early 1700s who figured out a way to measure power, in terms of horses. I suppose if the draft animals of the time had been some other species we would be measuring power under their names. But, for the sake of coal miners, he showed how much work could be measured by one horse in one day. The “horsepower” moniker has stuck until our own time.

I grew up riding horses and had never understood the term. But, one horse that stands out for me, Lady—a line-back buckskin, mostly quarter horse—gave me some emotional, and physical understanding, of horsepower. Lady was a beautiful animal, and one who never quite got used to being bridled, saddled, much more ridden. There were instances back there that the time passing from putting my left boot in the left stirrup, swinging my right leg over the saddle and attempting to find the right stirrup, and then being separated from the saddle were not many seconds. But, in that short interlude that I attempted to settle into the saddle, I could feel Lady’s compact quarter horse physiology flex, unflex, and attempt to adapt to me being on her back. The sensation was awing, feeling the power of one horse. It was a different but quite personal quantification of horsepower.

My elementary, middle school, and high school into college years were marked by the Cold War era. One would be mistaken to say there were no wars then. No world wars, but still there were major conflicts going on, but marked as well by the nuclear armament race between Russia and the United States.

Most of us were acquainted with the launching power of missiles and the nuclear warheads that compared to those bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima were almost beyond belief in their destructive power. The term “deterrent” kept being used. It took years for me to realize that part of the race was economic. One of the goals of the United States was to outlast and outspend the Russians, to even break their economy, by staying ahead on armament.

As you have gathered from previous chapters, my growing up had lots of time spent in a congregational setting. Power, as a term, floated through irregularly. There was only occasional reference made to “the power of the Resurrection,” the “power of the Spirit,” or “the power of prayer.” The phrases were dispersed in abstract, assumptive, ways. The prayer phrase got a little more attention with how God answers prayers—yes, no, wait. And that was the extent of tutelage

about prayer. Nothing about the various kinds of prayers. Or, how does one differentiate between the yes, the no, the wait concepts?

One of the favorite hymns in the congregation where I did the most growing up was “There Is Power in the Blood.” It showed up regularly in the song services, not for its theological substance—as I reflect back—but for its leaning into a snappy rhythm with “pow’r” getting vocal pops almost twenty times. Again, assumptions were in place that everybody got the idea about the “power in the blood.”

### The Money, Sex, Power Triad

I know. I’ve mentioned the triad idea before. But I did learn over the several years that I attempted to lead courses on Christian ethics, that the pedagogical tool of repetition, repetition, repetition had to be consciously employed. Not only semester by semester but from each class meeting to the next. Students were and are no different from the rest of the population in regard to how long they can focus on a matter.

Cultural pulls, which can be microcosmic to macrocosmic in scale, vie for their attention constantly. Some of them came with or developed better skills at being able to keep the connectivity of a course, with other courses, going. Of course, too many of them had come through systems that compartmentalized life. So, they had difficulty finding interface of one course, major, vocational track, with others.

Even though institutions with which I had relationship over the years called themselves “uni” versities, they tended toward functionally not being that. Or, in other words, a context in which the layers, the concentric circles, the chaos theories, and so forth should have been treated interdependently, through interdisciplinary approaches, continued the social compartmentalization, the silo approach through the various schools making up a university, even the departments within the schools.

I learned early on that I had to deliver a course in ways that would confront this tendency toward compartmentalization of courses, and life. But my confrontation had to take on a style of not being “in the students’ faces” but with a sense of “let’s look at this together, with regard to how these things are among us and what can and should we be doing about them.

Often the students had been educated—more informally than formally—that Christian ethics meant dealing with issues, and single issues at that. As for finding biblical-theological framing for whatever the social issues were, they were mostly inept and ignorant.

My attempts at thwarting this “issuism” fell mostly on hard ground, as it were. I can point to a minority of former students who “got it” as they came through. My sense is that society keeps recycling this approach to “issues” without much attention to how there is a larger ecology, if you will, of life on planet earth.

The triad of money, sex, and power developed out of that academic ethos, and is one I find is still needed and requires continual refining, in fact. The social issues of fad change; but cultural attention still wants this or that social dynamic to be “the” matter of concern.

Now that I’ve added power to the discussion, you likely will say, “Of course, money and power go together; and sex and power go together. The three are in operation with nearly every commercial on tv.”

Subtle is a descriptor for this interfacing from the commercial side of culture. To critique the validity of the values being sold with the commercials, we need to continually dissect where the interface of these issues are and what phase of valuing about them is being implemented.

Power brought into the discussion gives another angle by which we can recognize the interface of these three issue concepts. It is in these where life happens, goes on, deteriorates, possibly improves.

Certainly, this is a more complex kind of matter in which to be engaged than filtering everything through the enculturated perspective of one issue, or what could be identified as one issue. Those who have and do tend toward the issuism approach display, without their consciousness, a tendency to taking a detour when a level of complexity overtakes their want to dissect, delineate, discuss, or much more attempt to make a difference for good. But, dissect and delineate we must for the respective parts of the triad continue to morph requiring constant and consistent address.

#### Beneath and Between the Lines

Power can be quantified, when talking about mechanical power, the effects of electrical power. Or where the power of several people working together, the number of engines pulling a line of freight cars, or the difference of a few hundred horsepower gave advantage of vehicular speed in a shorter time was visibly effective. The powers of persuasion, intellectual power, are not particularly encouraged overall, though.

The Apostle Paul’s reference to “principalities and powers” was, and continues to be, another one of those phrases that got only cursory attention even in congregational settings. Somehow, the deliverers of the phrase always found a way to connect that to the cultural enemies of the respective congregation, or preacher. Not unusually, the phrase got translated into the characters being “demons.” Again, a mystical, out of body, ghost type, was easier to attack than make a reasonable interpretation and application of “principalities and powers.” The lack of quantification betrayed applied theology.

We can quantify a bit if we consider power from the perspective of being not quite visible but the effects can be. So that, in some ways we can quantify the principalities and powers so as to deal with them through the power of God, which also is difficult to quantify. But, the effects of which can make the functional definition of power more visible.

#### The Anatomy of Power

John Kenneth Galbraith, an economist of another generation, in one of his books, “The Anatomy of Power,” garnered my attention first because the word “anatomy” in the title found familiarity with my natural science background. As I excavated the book, I was first surprised that it was not directly about money. Rather, Galbraith examined how money is an expression of, a conduit of, a shaper, a catalytic agent of power. Though published in 1983, there is reason for all the generations following Galbraith to become familiar with how he provided a quite functional way to understand power. Of course, one may find one’s theological perspectives tested a bit if there is no room for making one’s theology functional for earthly matters.

Galbraith used two sets of three traits to offer his description of power. According to him there are three types of power: condign, compensatory, and conditioned. And those respective types each reflect some qualifying dynamics to power: personality, property, and organization. Galbraith took the position that the types are represented as historical frameworks and an evolution toward an ever-better expression of power is happening. I wonder if he were alive today if he’d have the same slant on global economics and power.

My take is that he’s essentially right about the projections of power through history; however, my perspective is that each of these forms coexist in any generation and continually recycle their own forms, constantly finding multiple ways to restructure toward taking advantage of others. Or, in the case of conditioned power continually fighting an uphill battle toward overcoming ignorance, ill will, conflicts over how power is to be distributed.

Condign is not a word that finds use in common conversation. It meant for Galbraith the use of painful consequences to obtain submission to an individual’s or group’s will. Like the other types of power, condign does have a range of expressions. The most extreme, the use of raw, brute force to get submission can be vividly seen in the tyrants of the past. Persons like Caligula, Nero, Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin can shape our imaginations toward the type of power used by tyrants. Contemporary figures who exhibit characteristics of toxic masculinity and narcissism reflect this style of power implementation.

Compensatory should have a resonance for most of us. Compensation—payment for service done. The idea of submission still runs through it. Whatever one is paid, there is an employer or employers who do hold the matter of power over the employee.

The type of power labeled conditioned by Galbraith is that which should find the most rapport for God followers. This is the power of persuasion. Appeal is made to the level of a respective constituency’s understanding of influencing, getting things done, but with the accoutrements of critical thinking and discernment about the matters at hand.

With the formative dynamics of personality, property, and organization, a multitude of ways for power to be expressed arise. Think in terms of how the Mongol Empire was built—on the deaths of several million people—at the command of Genghis Khan as compared to the use of the Aristotelian rhetoric to persuade peoples’ imaginations to a higher, more noble vision, the summum bonum. Or, how those who have a great deal of material wealth use it to bribe, extort, to get their way, but then there are those with material wealth who turn it to use for the Kingdom of God. And, of course, organizations can be reflective of the more negative forms of power. Yet

there are also centers formed, coalitions, that move on behalf of the larger, common good, rather than just their own introspective projects.

## The Church and Power

Church history demonstrates that the Church has expressed itself through all these types of power and formative dynamics delineated by Galbraith. Most of the internecine conflicts have been over who, and whose party, will be in charge, who will say what is up and what is down. The conflicts are what have given “dirty” as the qualifier for politics. The “it’s always about the money” can be dissected of the long years of the selling of indulgences to how much does a congregation spend on itself before others receive any benefit from the offerings?

Though the charges have become public on a broad scale only in recent decades, the sexual abuse by ministers, of whatever denominational brand, on children or same or different genders, has been between the lines, so to speak for centuries. The triad of money, sex, and power form too often grist for a conspiracy of silence of immense scale.

And I would be remiss if I failed to take note of how the Church and churches take advantage of ministers with the expectations of what amount to “25-8” work weeks for relatively minimum wage. There is such a thing as abuse of power by the Church and churches toward their own.

The Church and Power, indeed--Too much of the inappropriate use, or abuse, of power has tainted all the issue areas. Only when the connections are seen from the triadic view does the enormity of the misuse become apparent. No wonder the idea of Church/church has gone into decline. There is need for a reformation, a transformation, of how power, with all its connections to money and sex, should reflect and becomes the energy for a moral correction first inside which overflows to the outside.

But that last sentence is much easier written, or said, than pulled off. The abuse of power is so deeply entrenched in what we call the Church/churches, it will be next to impossible to dislodge. One of the things about power, when thought about in the mechanical sense, it can be diverted. Electrical power can be transformed, amplified.

There are, of course, those guidelines in the Old Testament and New Testament that raise the positive, godly, energies of power. Conversion can take on a more literal understanding when one’s “checkbook” reflects the transformed values, priorities change.

It’s taken twenty centuries for us to get to the point where we are—Church and power. Of course, the twenty centuries have been busy culminating in our current century in those who call themselves Christians, but too many exhibit little of what one must call the character of being a Jesus person. It’s anyone’s guess as to how long, if it can be done, that the more righteous forms of power become the driving energies of the Church or not.

In the meantime, likely it will be up to individuals, or groups of like-minded individuals, who are able to catch Galbraith’s paradigms. Perhaps through the recognition of the interplay of these elements, as well as with money, sex, and, yes, the triad of ethical theories, they can organize

and provide resistance to the tyrant/bully types, whether ministers or lay people, who misuse their powers of persuasion.

#### Conclusion:

Can these, who some call the Emerging Church, be the types who can educate us toward how to divert misused power toward the larger, common good in their given communities and regions? Empowerment has remained a faddish term which usually does not get any more than nuanced definition. But, encouragement, support, inspiration, motivation for those who are at lower rungs on the social/cultural ladder than they, can be the elements of empowerment. Education toward seeing a vision and enacting those visions toward betterment is needed. Intellectual power is meant to be shared, rather than consolidated among only a few.

#### For Further Discussion:

1. What are the uses of “power” that you have had education about?
2. What about the appearance of Galbraith’s three types of power in the Church? How does one recognize the inappropriate expression of power over against the appropriate use?
3. What are the challenges of implementing persuasive forms of power in a context of narcissism?
4. Which forms of power most closely align with the ideas of Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 5, Romans 12, Galatians 4:22-24, Philippians 4:8-9 toward the living out of these character traits raised?