

Power and Elemental Spirits of the Universe

Colossians 2:6-15, Galatians 6:10-12

The Rev. Dr. Christopher Hagen

Power used and abused is one of the arching drama themes of literature and history (along with love and adventure).

Colossians 2:6-15 names “elemental spirits” whose power work beyond human influence.

Acts 1:1-11 is the promise of power when the Holy Spirit comes upon, introducing the ability to confront and overcome nebulous, hidden forces.

Colossian 2:6-15

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe...

- *Philosophy*: vain speculation, fact collectors
- *Empty deceit*: foolish fraud, vacuous distortion, worthless falsehood
- *Human tradition*: legends, doctrines, “common sense”
- *Elemental spirits of the universe*: basic principles, primary matter, unquestioned notions that mislead, “powers that be”

Colossian 2:6-15

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

What are some forces
that break down society?

Galatians 6:10-12

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Examples of “rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness”

- Who decided on America’s form of capitalism instead of some other?
- Who decided that oxycodone (legalized heroine) was a good idea, leading to America’s opioid epidemic?
- Why can’t the U.S. provide universal health care when so many other countries can?
- Why do Japan, Denmark and Canada have no homeless people when there were 580,466 in the U.S. in January 2020?
- Why is there resistance to getting COVID vaccinations?

What does it take to be a moral person
in a perverse world?

Trust is a product
of properly executed power.

People are predisposed to trust.

Theologically, as created by God,
we are by definition in relationship with God.

That relationship is fundamentally one of trust.

Thus, disbelief and faithlessness are *unnatural*.

Contrasting Two Cultures

from Craig Van Gelder, PhD

Culture of Mistrust

- Criticism that marginalizes

Culture of Trust

- Critique that builds-up

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- Blames for what's wrong

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- Builds bridges between differences

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Culture of Mistrust

- Criticism that marginalizes
- Blames for what's wrong
- Stereotype, labeling, and thereby dismiss the other
- Politicizes
- Builds coalitions to lobby
- Self-protection and reacts

Culture of Trust

- Critique that builds-up
- Resolves what's wrong
- Respects, explores and learns from the other
- Collaborates
- Builds bridges between differences
- Willing to be vulnerable and risk

What is Power?

What is the function of power?

What is Power?

- Power consists in making others act as I choose. (Voltaire)
- Power is a zero-sum phenomenon. There is a fixed 'quantity' of power in any relationship. Any gain in power for one person must correspond to a diminishing of power in another. (C. Wright Mills)
- Power is the consent of the group to act on its behalf. (Hannah Arendt)

Colossians 2:13b-15

...God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

- What power does forgiveness have?
- What is meant by “he disarmed the rulers and authorities?”

Elemental Spirits of the Universe

- Power that controls, dominates and sometimes destroys
- Next time: power that creates, nurtures and builds

Power and Elemental Spirits of the Universe

Acts 1:6-8

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Acts 1:6-8

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

- What “power” do we have when the Holy Spirit is upon us?

- The power of the Holy Spirit does not dominate and is not located in experts, leaders, positions or stratified systems.
- The power of the Holy Spirit creates community, consensus and communal activity.
- Theological proposition: relationships of mutual respect and service *are themselves* manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

So the question is

*How can we exercise power
without domination or violence,
without resorting to hierarchies
of experts, leaders or authorities?*

Trust is a product
of properly executed power.

Power is exercised by

1. who frames the issue
2. who gets to decide the issue
3. who determines its application

How did Jesus exercise power?
What are some examples of what Jesus did?

What does non-dominating power look like for a congregation?

- Power resides in the group
- Holy Spirit is wherever 2 or 3 are gathered “in my name”, acting in concert. (Matthew 18:20)
- Church is, foremost, a community
- Church exists for the sake of the world, is servant to the world
- Reverse of hierarchy.
- Serving and giving supercede one’s wants or preferences
- Instead of “attraction,” church enters the neighborhood as partner

God's activities in this world

"the power of the Holy Spirit"

- Create
- Care
- Correct (redeem)
- Reconcile

In a Christ servant model

1. who frames the issue?
2. who gets to decide the issue?
3. who determines its application?

So then what does this mean for a congregation's ministry planning and engagement with the neighborhood?

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

What is the hope here?

What is church to be about?