

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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THE CHURCH, LIMPING ALONG

The real meaning of many words in Scripture is lost in the translation of the word. An example of this is the shocking statement Jesus made to the multitudes following him recorded in Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life, he *cannot* be my disciple." The word "cannot" here is the word "power". It is the same word Paul uses when he says "the gospel is the *power* of God unto Salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The difference in the way the word is used is the fact that in Luke the word *not* precedes it. Jesus is saying that if these qualifications are not met one does *not have the power* to be his disciple. How do we attain this power and what is its source? Within our own power we cannot even meet these qualifications much less have the power to be his disciples. The word for power is used over forty times in the New Testament in reference to the power of God. John does not use the word power at all while the other gospels use it primarily in reference to the power of God being centered on His right hand and being present in the ministry of Christ as he demonstrated it in his words and work. The gospels predict that the power of God would be available to human beings and work through them as it did in Jesus. This would be possible by the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is said to be the "power that works within us" (Eph. 3:20). It is in the epistles that the power of God in His people is fully demonstrated.

This brings us to the question: How does the Holy Spirit work out the power of God in His people? Or to put it another way; what is the basis of God's power in the life of the believer and in the life of the church? The unlikely and surprising answer to this question is found in II Corinthians 12:9 (NASV) where God told Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness". (Most versions, KJV, NIV, LB, RSV, translates this statement as "My power is perfected in weakness"). Paul accepted this by stating: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." R.C.H. Lenski in *The Interpretation of St. Paul's I and II Epistles to the Corinthians* renders it as: "for the power is brought to its finish in weakness." Two things to note about this translation: (1) The original language does not say "my power" rather "the power". So Lenski makes the word "power" refer to Paul's power, not God's. And (2) the word "perfected" should be translated "end" or "finished". This then can be translated: "My grace is sufficient for you for *your* power is *brought to its end* in weakness." This says that for the power of God to work in our lives our power must come to an end, leaving our weakness a vessel through which God can act. When we are brought to the place in our lives where we can no longer see anything in our life to enable us to answer our problems and deal with life's hard situations, it is at that point the power of God begins to work in us. So Paul further states; "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake; for when I am weak than I am strong" (verse 10). This is reminiscent of the words of Christ when he said "Whoever loses his life shall save it". In a power hungry world that emphasizes power and success, it is hard for the

Christian or the church to see and accept the hidden power of redemptive suffering because of the deep resistance of renouncing oneself and choosing to be least.

It is not popular today to speak of weakness in regard to the church. We emphasize the church's power and strength in its programs and numbers, its attractive edifices, its status in the world and the popularity of its clergy. In our modern day and age the church has looked upon weakness as an apparent lame and crippled state, and is to be avoided and corrected. Yet the church was born out of weakness and thrived by realizing the power of God being manifested in their weakness, not in their strength. The first prophesy in the Bible concerning salvation spoke of weakness when God told Satan that although his head would be crushed by the Messiah, he would bruise the Messiah on the heel (Gen. 3:15). The Hebrew writer sums up the weaknesses of many Old Testament saints with these words: "others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill treated, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the earth. And all these, having gained approval through their faith did not receive what was promised" (Heb. 11:36-39). The Apostle Paul spoke of weakness in this way: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (II Cor. 4:7-10). The Scriptures abound with illustrations of the power of God being manifested through weakness. Moses was "slow of speech, had never been eloquent and was slow of tongue" (Ex. 4:10). Gideon was the youngest in his father's house and his family was the least in Manasseh when the Lord told him to go and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian, and his army of 33,000 was reduced to 300 (Judges 6:14,15, 7:3,8). David was thought "not able to go against Goliath to fight with him because he was but a youth" (I Sam. 17:33). Jeremiah did not "know how to speak, because he was just a youth" (Jer. 1:6) and he suffered untold torture and hardship at the hands of those who rejected his message but God appointed him "over the nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and overthrow, and to build and plant (Jer. 1:10). Amos was "not a prophet nor the son of a prophet, only a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs" but the Lord took him from following the flock and said "Go prophesy to My people Israel" (Amos 7:14,15). The twelve apostles were "uneducated and untrained men" (Acts 4:13) but God changed the world and the course of history through them.

The power of the church is found in weakness, because the power of God was demonstrated in weakness: the message preached and the crucifixion of the Christ: "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are saved it is the power of God...For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-

pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe...but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and the Gentiles foolishness, but to those called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than man” (I Cor. 1:18-25). The church today that emphasizes power and strength in its worldly possessions, great numbers and recognition by society is missing the power of God. They may have many “following Christ who do not have the power to be His disciples.” In her book *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* Marva J. Dawn asks: “If the church is faithful to its true vocation as a created power through the weakness that gives way to God’s tabernacling, then why have we turned pastors into successful CEOs instead of shepherds for the weak? Why do we search for pastors who are handsome, sophisticated, charismatic – instead of models of suffering? Why do our churches adopt practices of business life and its achievements as models? And, why do we resort to gimmicks instead of practicing an ‘unadulterated’ handling of the Word?” She further quotes the French theologian, Jocques Ellul where he asks in *The Subversion of Christianity*: “How has it come about that the development of Christianity and the church has given birth to a society, a civilization, a culture that are completely opposite of what we read in the Bible, to what is indisputably the text of the law, the prophets, Jesus and Paul?”

The world is watching those that claim to be the Church and is examining the conduct of its members. A few weeks ago a local newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer*, carried an article of two full pages plus two columns and the headline on the front page about David Cerullo, owner of the Inspirational Network who “brings home more than \$1.5 million a year, making him the best paid leader of any religious charity tracked by watch dog-groups, by preaching the gospel of prosperity and repeating this on-air assertion: ‘God brings financial favor to those who donate.’” This is not just local criticism. It may or may not be true but on June 1st the online Russian issue of *Pravda* carried an article entitled *American Capitalism Gone With A Whimper* after criticizing “the American populace for the surrender of their freedoms and sold out to the whims of their elites and betters” said this about America’s religion: “Their faith in God was destroyed, until their churches, all tens of thousands of different ‘branches and denominations’ were for the most part little more than Sunday circuses and their televangelists and top protestant mega preachers were more than happy to sell out their souls and flocks to be on the ‘winning’ side of one pseudo Marxist politician or another. Their flocks may complain, but when explained that they would be on the ‘winning’ side, their flocks were ever so quick to reject Christ in hopes of earthly power. Even our Orthodox churches are scandalously liberalized in America.” This, to our shame, is how a Russian newspaper views religion in America. In a German publication, *Spiegel Special*, an article entitled *Karaoke For The Lord* stated: “the megachurches mushrooming in the United States are mammoth feel-good temples providing entertainment for one and all. The ministers used to deliver weekly jeremiads excoriating homosexuality, feminism and abortion, but many, particular younger evangelists, are now using the pulpit to preach about Africa and the environment.”

The world has long looked upon the weakness of the church as showing it to be moss-backed, archaic and out of touch with the world. Thus it has been spurned, neglected and ignored by a

worldly system which feels it has no need of even recognizing the church as being a viable factor in the everyday affairs of man.

Part of the reason for the low estimate of the church by the world is due to the fact that the church has always limped through history. Men look at weaknesses of the people of God and assume this apparent lame and crippled state of the church is ample reason for dismissing it as being of any real importance. In our modern day and age the church has looked at this prevailing attitude of the world and some have decided it is time to do something about it. The result has been to make the church more relevant and acceptable to the world’s modern way of thinking. The watchword of the religious world has been “modernize”! The focus is upon the weakness of the church being cured by new and modern methods and managerial strength. As a result the church today lays little emphasis upon the past (after all what can we learn from the early church?), and has dealt upon the future and renewal. It’s attention now is given to mega-churches, super-structures and innovation in worship services designed to meet the felt needs of a generation of baby boomers who have not found themselves or if they have they don’t know what to do with themselves.

Many leaders speak and write about the weaknesses of Christians and the church as being “hidebound” “stuck-in-the-mud” “dying for change” or “too traditional”. Leith Anderson writes in *Dying For Change* that “Christianity has done well on revelation (the Bible) but poorly on relevance (the culture).” So modern practitioners are repulsed at the limp they see in the church. Why not then take the world’s modern innovations, technology and modern managerial techniques and give the church a new knee implant so it can lose it’s limp and run along side the world? This question is answered by David Wells in his book *God In The Wasteland*. He states: “Today evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness. In first impressions this worldliness does not appear ugly at all. Quite the opposite. It maintains a warm and friendly countenance, parading itself as successful entrepreneurship, organizational wizardry, and a package of slick public relations insights that are essential to the facilitation of evangelical business. Now there is nothing wrong with entrepreneurship or organizational wizardry or public relations or television images and glossy magazines per se. The problem lies in the current evangelical inability to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to the Christian faith.” James says that “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

The fact is that the church’s limp is actually confirmation of its power, relevance, and significance. Immediately after Adam’s sin in the garden, God told Satan that the deliverer would crush his head. But God also said that in the process the heel of the Lord would be bruised (Gen. 3:15). The limp then, that Christ’s body displays is actually a sign of victory, not a sign of defeat or incompetence. It is an emblem of triumph. When Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes wrestled through the night with the angel at Penial, he limped ever afterwards as a sign that he prevailed (Gen. 32:31). The Apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh and, at least symbolically, he kept limping in the eyes of men. It was in this weakness that Christ’s power was affirmed and perfected (II Cor. 12:9). So the church limps through history. As believers we should not be discouraged and there is certainly no need to adopt the remedies of the world.

