

“NOW WE THE STRONG ARE OBLIGED TO BEAR THE WEAKNESSES OF THE WEAK.” PAUL’S ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE LANGUAGE, LOCATION AND PURPOSE OF POWER.

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Paul’s words from Romans 15:1 sound rather self-confident and patronising—unhelpfully prejudicial in a letter aimed at reconciliation and overcoming ethnic and theological barriers. In fact, these categories are borrowed from the status-conscious social world of Rome, where strength was related to ethnicity, material resources, reputation, social connectedness and the ability to exercise power over others. In declaring the self-styled strong as under obligation to the powerless, Paul is reordering the church along different lines. Then he extends the instruction: the responsibility to build up the neighbour belongs to “each of us.” In doing so he affirms the agency not only the powerful but also the ‘powerless.’ This is striking in a system that understands only the strong as having the capacity to act, being capable of sharing resources, building the church. Everything must be done with the goal of mutual upbuilding. Ultimately, Paul’s thought is grounded in Christology: Christ refused to please himself.

This paper will explore the implications of Paul’s ecclesiology for the contemporary church by suggesting that in the situation where the weak judge the strong and the strong despise the weak, Paul is responding to power structures at work in his own social world that are in conflict with his experience of Christ’s suffering, self-giving and radical welcome to all. Beginning by expressing these notions in terms of the powerful and powerless, it will develop a Christological perspective to the exercise of power—what we will call cruciform power.¹ It will pay particular attention to the location of power in the church and the purposes it serves, and ask whether our ecclesiology offers a challenge to the power structures of our world. Greathouse says these communities are rare indeed, if they actually exist. “Has the church failed to hear and heed Paul’s unbending call for the strong to bear the burden of the weak as demanded by genuine love?”²

¹ This is described as “life-giving suffering and transformative potency-in weakness.” Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2001), 93.

² William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9—16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (NBBC; Kansas City; Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 222.

With a plea for unity addressed to a people experiencing social, theological and ethnic divisions, Paul urges a Christlike response. The categories of the “powerful” or “strong” (*dunatos*) and “powerless” or “not strong” (*adunatos*) (15:1) in the Paul’s letter to the Romans are often determined along the lines of Jews and non-Jews, those who are law observant or not, those who observe particular feasting days and who eat particular kinds of food—with their related idolatrous practices.³ Mark Reasoner argues persuasively from a socio-cultural perspective that Paul is not merely addressing ethnic, theological and cultural issues but also deep social divisions, and consequently, divisions in power. He finds that the high incidence of “strong” and “weak” terms applied to people in Rome “show a society preoccupied with one’s place on the vertical axis of social power. Persons measured their worth by the people over whom they could exercise social power, and Paul’s language reflects Roman labels.”⁴ The church would reflect this social consciousness. That is, the categories of powerful and powerless refer not just those who feel free and able to tolerate other’s opinions and practices, but those with status and influence, those with the capacity to act, to contribute, those who have access to resources and are able to determine outcomes, and those who do not.

In the status-conscious social world of Rome, influence, social connectedness, reputation, and honour were everything. Such power was to be possessed and displayed, and could be demonstrated with wealth, achievements, influence, high-status friends, impressive physical appearance, learning, and wise and eloquent speech. Not to be in possession of such

³ These labels may well be given by the strong. Indeed, Paul numbers himself among the strong (15:1) “[T]he strong/weak terminology has probably been invented (or adopted) by the strong in Rome to reflect their stereotypical grasp of the situation in a way that would hardly have been welcomed by those they labelled as “the weak.” Philip Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 343.

⁴ Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14:1—15:13 in Context* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 63. See too, Carl N. Toney, *Paul’s Inclusive Ethic: Resolving Community Conflicts and Promoting Mission* (WUNT II. 252; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 33. While not in agreement with all aspects of Reasoner’s work, Carl Toney finds Reasoner’s social investigation “heightens the strong’s responsibility by noting their position of social superiority. Thus, Paul addresses the socially superior strong in order to convince them to enact a change for the good of the community and to elevate the social status of the weak” (46). “[T]hese people were living in a city with marked socioeconomic divisions, and they cherished attitudes towards honour that easily accommodated feelings of envy and competitiveness toward those not members of one’s ingroup.” Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 344.

status indicators meant that one was not powerful but powerless.⁵ The prevailing order to which Paul was responding functioned in a much broader scheme. The Emperor was *Paterfamilias*, and there was an "all-pervasive patriarchal domination" as empire was organised in a "strictly hierarchical, autocratic structure."⁶ But there are, as Ehrensperger observes, parts of the letter "which clearly call for ways of life which differ radically."⁷ 14:1—15:3 is one of these.

Much has been written about power in Paul. Michael Gorman's working definition is "power understood as the ability to exercise significant control or influence, either for good or ill, over people and/or history." His summary "Power, we might say, is the ability to *form* or transform."⁸ Kathy Ehrensperger develops this positive aspect of transformation as a key to the exercise of power in the Pauline communities. She describes a "transformative power," which must be based on consent and trust to be truly empowering—and this in contrast to any force or domination. That is "the positive, empowering dimensions of power, as distinct from domination and control."⁹ So, while we could address Paul's ideas about power semantically, taking the terms *exousia*, *dunamis*, *arche*—Greek words which may be translated as power, we will instead look more generally at Paul's address to the Roman church and other texts for further support or explanation of how Paul and his communities negotiated the dynamics of power. But it is also important to look at where and how Paul's power language is generated, and this appears to be his understanding of Christ's incarnation and self-emptying.

Work in Paul's weak and strong language in his letter to the Romans is often related to occurrences in the idol food debate of Corinthians (1 Cor 8—10); more helpful for this paper will be to address the reflections on the same terminology in Paul's theme of "power in weakness." This is indeed unusual. "[T]o relate authority claims to weakness and suffering seems at least paradoxical if not foolish from the perspective of a society which was saturated

⁵ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 270.

⁶ Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power, Communication and Interaction in the Early Christ Movement* (LNTS 325; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 10-11.

⁷ Ehrensperger, *Power*, 12.

⁸ Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 269. For further reading, see Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*. It has been noted that many of Paul's recent interpreters on this topic, concerned with contemporary use and abuse of power, approach Paul with "a hermeneutic of suspicion." Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Land, "Paul And His Social Relations: An Introduction," pages 1-6 in Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Land (eds.) *Paul and His Social Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 2.

⁹ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 196

with values of strength and competitive dominating power."¹⁰ Paul is weak in his presence and rhetorically not impressive: “When I am weak then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10); “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor 10:10); “I came to you in weakness and fear and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3). Weakness is apparent in his physical suffering: God’s response to Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” is that “my power is made perfect in your weakness” (2 Cor 12:9), and this includes Paul’s co-suffering with Christ.

Paul’s power-in-weakness extends to the dishonourable activity of working with his hands for a living rather than availing himself of patronage (11:7), marks of physical abuse and humiliation in his body (11:24-25) and his attitude of meekness and humility. He bases his life as an apostle and exercise of authority on the Christ event. Thus, Paul can say "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10b). And this is his key formulation between weakness and power. He relativises human strength and human effort in order to demonstrate that it is God's power at work through him and in his communities. This is in contrast to values of the surrounding world and any claims being made by his opponents, the impressive “super-apostles,” who may well have demonstrated all of the characteristics of strong, authoritative leadership which Paul’s communities would have welcomed from their apostle but whose validity Paul rejected. And he rejected it largely because it was power exercised on the basis of already-held privilege—either directly or based on a relationship of patronage.

Apart from the fact that access to leadership roles was constrained to the wise, well-born and powerful, the characteristics of good leadership were good standing, honour rhetorical eloquence in the assembly and, not least of all, not having to perform manual labour but benefitting from the work of others. These privileges were reserved for a few, thus the only way for lower-class members to get a share in the power of such 'strong-men' was to acknowledge a patronage relationship with one of these aristocrats.¹¹

This seems to be exactly what Paul was resisting by attempting to establish the obligation of the powerful to the powerless and sense of mutuality and other-regard. Leadership by privilege or patronage was absolutely inappropriate in light of the gospel. Rather, power should be exercised in human weakness. It is not that power can only be manifest in human weakness, not that power is inherent in weakness, but rather to say that power is manifested

¹⁰ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 98.

¹¹ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 103.

in weakness is explicitly a rejection of human systems of domination—a rejection of Roman power claims and value systems. It is also to do with the nature of Christ's suffering and death; he *was* crucified in weakness; but *now* he lives by the power of God (2 Cor 13:4). In other words, any claims to power made in worldly terms actually prevent the power of God from being manifest. Identifying power-in-weakness however is the means to seeing the power of God at work in the community. It is a radical reversal of values, an inversion which means that rather than honour and power, those following Christ manifest dishonour and powerlessness.

It is a classic Pauline paradox that it is in social weakness, and *only* in such weakness, that the power of God might be displayed. But this notion of power-in-weakness applies to the apostle himself only because it first applies to Christ. And, although the language of power and powerlessness is not present, this is epitomised for Paul in the Christ hymn of his letter to the Philippians 2:6—1, which has been described as Paul's "master story."¹²

First, it matters that Paul's story of Christ's self-giving is set in an exhortation to other-regard: "Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4). And this is the broader context of what it means to have the same "mind" (mind-set, or way of thinking) that was in Christ Jesus (2:5). Paul tells us that Christ did not consider equality with God something to be exploited for his own advantage. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross. God therefore exalted him. Christ's self-emptying demonstrated God's activity, or way of being, in the world. For Paul, this is a revelation of the nature of God, who was at work in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). Social status and social power are therefore rejected in favour of powerlessness.

There is an interesting phrase to consider at the beginning of the Christ-hymn. Often translated "*although* being in the form of God," there is a compelling case for the additional translation of "being" as "*because* he was in the form of God." Gorman says the first is "counterintuitive character" (although); and the second is "cruciform character" (because), describing them as "two sides of the same coin."¹³ So, on one hand, *although* Christ possessed equality with God, he chose not to exercise any privilege but took the route of self-

¹² Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009), 12-13.

¹³ Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 10.

humbling; on the other hand, *because* Christ was in the form of God, he demonstrated the nature of God in his self-emptying action. A narrative pattern emerges from the Chris-hymn: “Although [x] Not [y] but [z]”; “although” [status], “not” [selfishness], “but” [selflessness].¹⁴ The selflessness exhibited by Christ can be seen in the phrases “he emptied himself,” “he humbled himself.” These are the downward movements of the incarnation. They are the alternative to selfish exploitation of power. Paul acts in the way he does, therefore, because he shapes his identity and ministry on the one by whom he has been called. Furthermore, such downward movements of self-giving should characterise the communities God has brought into being.

The challenge to pattern relationships on a way of life in Christ would have arisen with the values of the dominant Roman elite, which would undoubtedly have influenced some Christians. To talk about transformative power is not to deny that there are asymmetrical relationships. But the exercise of power takes on certain Christ or Gospel-shaped characteristics which are consistent with the message being proclaimed. This means that hierarchies may exist but cannot be established on a permanent basis, only “functional in nature serving a limited purpose for a limited time.”¹⁵ Not only does Paul place the strong or powerful under obligation to those without power—“we should not just please ourselves”—but he goes on to insist that *each of us* must please our neighbour. The result is a mutual obligation. But it is significant that those with power are given particular responsibility to facilitate this mutuality. Not least because it is impossible for those without power to exercise the kind of influence which would be required to make it happen.

It is worth highlighting the distinction between mutuality and reciprocity. In the ancient world, vertical reciprocity in the case of the patron and client was advanced for the enhancement of the power and status of the patron—and practiced in terms of expectation and obligation. Thus, it is “by its nature, thoroughly inequitable.”¹⁶ Mutuality, on the other hand, has to do with the promotion of well-being of those involved in the exchange. This mutuality is grounded, for Ehrensperger, in the grace the communities in Christ have received—their understanding of the gospel. In an activity which the groups should emulate, Christ has “welcomed” both the powerful and the powerless. They are therefore to

¹⁴ Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 16.

¹⁵ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 186.

¹⁶ Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 158.

“welcome” one another—to be unified and mutually accepting (14:1, 15:7), since God (14:3) and Christ (15:7) have welcomed them.¹⁷ Where power is exercised without consideration for mutuality and building up the body—examples of “malformed relationships” and “corrupt systems of measurement”—these are symptoms “of the ‘present evil age’ with which the gospel collides.”¹⁸

Ehrensperger highlights the need for trust. And, although trust “does not render a relationship symmetrical and does not presuppose that those committed to each other are equals or the same, it presupposes mutual respect on the basis of their shared trust in God through Christ.”¹⁹ This trust is crucial for Ehrensperger’s transformative relationships, which must never exert force, domination or control. She describes power emerging “in communicative action.” “[W]here power-over is exercised in a non-dominating, non-paternalistic but transformative way, where people act together in solidarity, trust is the indispensable core dimension.”²⁰ It is important that such a transformative power remain in view, and the goal as the transcendence of asymmetrical power. Losing sight of the goal of a transformative power relationship—that is, its own eventual transcendence—and falling back to maintaining the relationship as an end in itself—can only result in a dominating rather than empowering relationship.²¹

So Paul’s master story of Christ’s incarnation and self-emptying, the downward movement of servanthood and humility shape his own ministry profoundly. It also shapes Paul’s expectation of his communities. Consequently, they are not to model themselves on the power structures of their social world—those based on hierarchies, asymmetrical relationships of reciprocity such as patron-client relationships, maleness, ethnicity, privileges of birth, and access to resources. Rather, just as Christ has welcomed them, so they are to welcome one another. The strong are obligated to the weak. They are not to perpetuate worldly social structures but to exercise Christ like transformative power with the goal of the transcendence of unequal power relations. Furthermore, members of Paul’s communities,

¹⁷ This carries the sense of to “receive or accept into one’s society, home, circle of acquaintances.” James G. Dunn, *Romans 9—16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 798.

¹⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977), 74.

¹⁹ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 183.

²⁰ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 183.

²¹ Ehrensperger, *Dynamics of Power*, 29.

“each of us,” are urged to “please our neighbour, for the good purpose of building up the neighbour” (Rom 15:2). Again, the rationale is Christ, who “did not please himself” (15:3)—another allusion to Paul’s “master story.” Here Paul shares the responsibility equally: those without the kind of power required to get ahead in the social world of Rome are still expected to contribute fully to the life of the in-Christ community, without exception.

Our global church has much to learn from Paul’s challenge to the prevailing social order and the kinds of leadership structures which it generates and perpetuates. Clearly those who are under-resourced, lacking in connectivity, unable to access education, and lacking global influence will continue to struggle at the periphery of the global church. And everybody suffers. This is not a problem of lack of giftedness but a reflection on the way those who have power exercise it. There are many examples we might address but we will take the role of women.

Reading Paul’s letters, gendered language of brothers (*adelphoi*) presupposes women and should be translated as such. Ehrensberger reminds us that women are always present as active members of the movement, except where explicitly stated otherwise. It is not only our bible translations which are problematic. Our church seems to be largely successful at keeping women out of leadership positions—positions where they might be enabled to exercise transformative power. I would suggest that this is less about the way we read the text than it is about the fact that we tend to perpetuate gender and hierarchical distinctions in a way which feels comfortable and comforting. That is, we do not challenge the prevailing order but rather conform to it. And in this we do not take the gospel seriously—just as Greathouse claims when he says that the church has failed to heed and hear Paul’s call.

According to Beverly Gaventa, Paul’s letters should bring us to focus on the question “What is God doing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and what does that gospel mean for the lives of women?”²² Being in Christ brings the “identity conferring” realm of male or female to an end—and with it, the privilege assigned to being male. For women as with other who were previously marginalised the gospel’s arrival “obliterates . . . ‘places’ with which people identify themselves, even the most fundamental places of ethnicity, economic and social

²² That is, instead of looking for permissions and prohibitions, Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 65-66

standing, and gender. The only location for those grasped by the gospel is ‘in Christ’.”²³ If only the church could grasp the gospel and have the courage to let it truly shape our way of being together.

Do we take seriously Paul’s point that when those who follow Christ make claims to power based on human standards, or exercise power in ways consonant with the dominant culture, they are likely to be in the way of God’s activity in the world? Could we, with Paul, explicitly reject the exercise of human power and privilege, not only on a personal but also on a structural level, as contrary and damaging to our corporate life in Christ? Are leadership roles constrained to the wise, well-born and powerful? If so, what structures need to be addressed in order for things to change? What might happen if, following Christ’s downward movement of servanthood and humility, ultimately expressed in power-in-weakness in the cross, we were to welcome, and have regard for, the other? Could we make this goal of building up the community, locally and globally, our mark, and look to eradicate distinctions on the basis of gender, ethnicity, social location or any kind of identifiable “place”? In Paul’s churches, the only thing one is permitted do with any power one might have is it use it in transformative, boundary crossing ways to foster mutuality and build up the neighbour. Asymmetrical relationships maybe necessary, but only temporarily. While the powerless are required to contribute whatever is necessary to build up the neighbour, it is the powerful who are given the responsibility to exercise transformative power and demonstrate that the radical claims of the gospel require a welcome in Christ for all.

²³ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 68. Gaventa highlights the fact that “so few attempts to hear Paul’s letters have been written by women, or written with women’s lives self-consciously in the foreground” (70).