

Divine Persuasion in a Coercive World

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
March 13, 2022

Ancient Witness: 1 Corinthians 1:18, 26-31

Today we are going to meditate up these amazing words of Paul about how God acts in the world: “For the message of the cross... is the power of God.” Today I would like us to focus on this and ask, What is true power? What is divine power?

The natural, human tendency is to equate power with physical, brute strength. It is usually conceived as the ability to have one’s way or impose one’s will. When we think of power, often our mind’s eye comes to rest upon images of impressive technology, vast structures, or guns, troops and tanks. Yet despite the limits of our imagination, we hear the words spoken to and through Paul: “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). What does this mean?

Let’s take an example for everyday living to help understand this. Let’s say that I have an adolescent child, who was having difficulty going to school. I try everything. Finally, nothing I say to them has any effect anymore. So, to compel attendance I physically have to accompany the child to school and sit with them throughout the day. And of course, I could not compel that child to actually learn anything even while present at class. So you see, the power to compel or force is a last resort, which expresses my total powerlessness in all ways that matter.

By the way, so it is that warfare is an expression of human powerlessness. It is our last resort—when we come to the end of our rope. It is evidence of our inability to foster good relationships as God’s children.

The power to compel is, indeed, a wretched and pitiful form of power. And it is amazing and perplexing that this most inferior of all forms of human power has often been made the model for divine power. I am convinced that this misunderstanding of how God acts in the world is the most important theological issue today. Attributing coercive, intervening power to God is at the root of so many problems today.

Theologian John Cobb has said, “The only power capable of any worthwhile result is the power of persuasion” (from *God and the World*). True power—power made perfect in weakness—only this kind of power can redeem. So when we think of God’s power as persuasive power, it no longer means that God exercises a monopoly of power and compels everything to be just as it is. No, God’s persuasive power maximizes the freedom of the one whom God seeks to persuade. God’s persuasive power does not bind or restrict or take away the power of the other. Power in the divine sense is more like the words, “authority” or “respect.” We obey not because we have no choice, but precisely because we have a choice!

This is the kind of power that God exercises in creation. It is not with sudden and forceful intervention, but subtly and gently God’s Spirit gradually coaxes transformation in an

evolutionary way. Especially in our scientific era, the only kind of divine power that makes sense is non-violent, non-intervening persuasive power.

Yet misunderstanding about God's power has persisted throughout the centuries. Many of the crowds who flocked to Jesus—even the disciples themselves—were disappointed that the Messiah did not come after the model of King David—mighty, warlike and powerful according to worldly standards.

Because of their misunderstanding of what true power is, Jesus boggled their minds. And so as Christians, we look to Jesus as an embodiment of the nature of God, in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” when we look at Jesus we can see God. And what do we see? A meek, gentle, unarmed, harmless man, a man later seized, beaten and tortured to death on a cross. Jesus said, “I am gentle and humble in spirit,” and everything he did conveyed this spirit of gentleness, this unarmed love, even in the face of violence and brute force. He turned the other cheek and did not return evil for evil. And it is “the message of the cross,” the very antithesis of coercive power, which “is the power of God.”

So the perennial question, why does God allow bad, evil things to happen? implies a misunderstanding of God's power. Because God's power is persuasive love that does not intervene.

The persuasive power of God does not physically constrain the body, but it does work on the inside, and most dramatically of all in the hearts and consciences of women and men, loving us into being, forgiving us into existence. As Paul wrote, “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong... what is low and despised... to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28)

I like what the famous preacher of an earlier generation, George Buttrick, had to say on this subject:

[Humanity's] power is a fake. Let the reader underline the word power in the columns of today's newspapers; [one] will find that in almost every instance it is the mask of death. Then... underline the word power in the Bible; one will find that in every instance, except those that describe the cankered and transitory power of evil, it is the promise of life... There is only one power—the power of God's love...

Sacred, spiritual power is the weight of a promise, the impression made by love. God's love and God's power are the same thing! Love, of course, cannot be coercive; it respects the other. You cannot force someone to love you back. In the same way, God's power of renewal and transformation depends upon being received in love.

Only persuasive power, the power used by God, can bring wholeness. We know all too well the power of force and violence—to inflict terror and wage war. Yet how can the destruction of an enemy, who is also loved by God, how is this a victory? Violence is a *negative power*, which is never “good.” Sometimes it is the path of the least evil, but it is never saving.

With God, the method and the goal cohere. God gently works for gentleness, lovingly works for love, peacefully works for peace. In God, the end and the means are consistent.

When the work of war is finished, only persuasive love can restore, build up, reconcile and save. This is the true power, which is positive and which is needed to wage peace. This is *positive power*.

Martin Luther King once said:

Ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.

Ultimately, there needs to be something more. Ultimately, we need divine persuasion and love to do its work. Ultimately, peace will not exist until true power, the ultimate weapon, is used and used to its fullest. This is the message of the cross, the word of love, Holy power. And this persuasive love is the only power in the universe that can call forth life, destroy hatred, break down walls of hostility, and change hearts of cold stone into hearts of warm flesh.

Listen to these words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, that great liberal preacher at Riverside Church generations ago:

*Here lies the test
Of the church's loyalty to the cross,
That even in a warring generation it is still sure
That the persuasiveness of the divine life,
Lived sacrificially for all people,
Reaches deeper,
Takes hold harder,
And lasts longer,
Than all the coercion the world can amass against it.*

Coercion, violence and even wars may rage, but ultimately our hope and faith is not in this, but in the message of the cross, the ultimate power.

I'll conclude this morning with a story told by Joseph Brodsky, an exiled Russian poet. It was about a scene that took place in one of the many prison camps of northern Russia about 60 years ago.

At 7:00 a.m. the door of a cell was flung open and on its threshold stood a prison guard who addressed its inmates: "Citizens! The collective of this prison's guards challenges you, the inmates, to socialist competition in cutting the lumber amassed in our yard." In those parts there is no central heating, and the local police, in a manner of speaking, tax all the nearby lumber companies for one-tenth of their produce. By the time I am describing, the prison yard looks like a veritable lumberyard. The piles were two to three stories high, dwarfing the one-storied quadrangle of the prison itself. The need for cutting was evident, although socialist competition of this sort had happened before. "And what if I refuse to take part in this?" inquired one of the inmates. "Well, in that

*case, no meals for you,” replied the guard. Then axes were issued to inmates, and the cutting started. Both prisoners and guards worked in earnest, and by noon, all of them, especially the always underfed prisoners, were exhausted. A break was announced and people sat down to eat—except the fellow who asked the question. He kept swinging the axe. Both prisoners and guards exchanged jokes about him, something about Jews being normally regarded as smart people whereas this man... and so forth. After the break they resumed the work, although in a somewhat flagging manner. By 4:00 p.m. the guards quit, since for them it was the end of their shift; a bit later the inmates stopped too. The man’s axe kept swinging. Several times he was urged to stop, by both parties, but he paid no attention. It seemed as though he had acquired a certain rhythm he was unwilling to break; or was it a rhythm that possessed him? To the others, he looked like an automaton. By 5:00, by 6:00, the axe was still going up and down. Both guards and inmates were now watching him keenly, and the sardonic expressions on their faces gradually gave way to one of bewilderment and then to one of terror. By 7:30 the man stopped, staggered into his cell, and fell asleep. For the rest of his stay in that prison, no call for socialist competition between guards and inmates was issued again. Although the wood kept piling up. (from *Why, God?*, by Burton Cooper, p.115)*

The guards could deal with physical rebellion or even moral condemnation. But like the persuasive power of God, the prisoner’s overworked axe caused a change in the hearts of the guards and authorities. This is the power of love that is willing to be vulnerable, to be wounded and to suffer for the other.

“For the message of the cross... is the power of God.”