

Wonders and Waterbuffaloes: Reflections on the relationship
between power and weakness in the missionary life

by

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SYNOPSIS

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10)

This paper is a study of power and weakness in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians is ‘the best case-study in missionary spirituality ever published’ (David Bosch 1979:). I have explored Paul’s conception of the power/ weakness dynamic in mission, and tried to unpack its implications for the way we think about and do mission today.

The study includes a discussion of two very different but not irreconcilable approaches to mission: the ‘power evangelism’ of John Wimber and the ‘waterbuffalo theology’ of Kosuke Koyama.

Dedicated to:

John Wimber
and
Kosuke Koyama

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION		
1.1	Introductory remarks	1
1.2	Theological and missiological context	1
1.3	Methodology	2
1.4	Definition of terms	2
1.5	Limitations	3
1.6	Protagonists	4
CHAPTER 2: SIGNS AND SKOLOPS		
2.1	Historical background to 2 Corinthians	5
2.2	Word studies	7
2.3	Key passages	9
2.4	Summary	17
CHAPTER 3: BROKENNESS AND EMBRACE		
3.1	Influences on Kosuke Koyama	18
3.2	Koyama's missiology	19
3.3	Key Koyama-isms	20
3.4	Reflections on Koyama	23
CHAPTER 4: SIGNS AND WEAKNESS		
4.1	Influences on John Wimber	24
4.2	John Wimber's missiology	25
4.3	John Wimber and the Corinthians	26
4.4	Summary	28
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS		30
APPENDIX 1: Paul's thorn in the flesh		31

1.1 *Introductory remarks*

We know a lot about St. Paul. The Acts of the Apostles is a selective but illuminating account of Paul's travels, highlighting some of the particular highs and lows of his apostolic experience. This narrative is complemented well by the epistles, where we encounter Paul somewhat more directly and gain profound insights into his disposition and thought. The letters are pastoral in character and also deeply personal, allowing us to see as it were the man inside the apostle. One aspect of Paul's thought and experience which I find particularly intriguing is his approach to the concepts of *weakness and power*, especially as they relate to apostolic life and ministry.

1.2 *Theological and missiological context*

The focus of this study is 2 Corinthians, and I am presupposing some familiarity with 'The Fool's Speech' in particular (2 Corinthians 11:1-12:10), a gem of Pauline rhetoric where he defends himself against potentially damaging criticism from his congregation in Corinth. The whole argument is flavoured by the words *ασθενεια* and *δυναμις*, weakness and power, and it seems that Paul's circumstances have led him to a particular understanding of these two. I have carried out a word study on *ασθενεια* and *δυναμις*, and then with the help of commentaries (especially useful were Martin and Barnett), tried to get inside the mind of Paul on this subject. I am also particularly indebted to James Dunn's chapter on "The Religious Experience of Paul" in *Jesus and the Spirit*, and to Gordon Fee's *The Empowering Presence of God*.

Study of the theology of weakness and power is hardly an original pursuit – many scholars, including those above, have written about it. However, I believe the biblical context of these truths has not always been fully appreciated, even by those scholars who have done so much to unpack the theology. As we shall see, Paul is *not* constructing a generalized theology of 'power in weakness'; rather he is defending and describing his particular claim to speak for Christ (2 Cor. 13:3), his particular status as "Christ's ambassador" (5:20). That is to say, the context of Paul's reflections on power and weakness is supremely *missiological*. He is describing aspects of a distinctively *missionary* lifestyle. His thought may well have wider implications for personal spirituality and pastoral care, but the only conclusions we can draw out of it with any certainty are missiological ones.

Having established this, it is striking how little the subject has been tackled in a specifically missiological light. David Bosch made one worthwhile contribution in this area, with a small volume entitled *A Spirituality of the Road*, but there is very little else. It strikes me that the amount of attention which this aspect of Paul's thought has received in missiological circles is in inverse proportion to the *need* for it to be apprehended and meditated on in those circles. What *is* this peculiar dynamic which Paul can describe only through the mouthpiece of a 'Fool'? What is he suggesting

about the character of authentically Christian witness? Is the missionary to understand himself¹ as a person of power or of weakness, and how does this relate to the way the ‘ambassador of Christ’ is *perceived* amongst those with whom he lives and works? These are some of the questions which suggest themselves.

1.3 Methodology

The first chapter of this paper consists of straightforward exegesis. Then, given the scarcity of existing missiological reflection on my chosen theme, I have needed to be somewhat creative in my methodology. I have chosen two missiologists with very different backgrounds and approaches, and examined their works in the light of my findings from Paul. These individuals are Kosuke Koyama and John Wimber. Neither has written specifically on ‘power and weakness’, but they both provide interesting and provocative angles from which to come at the subject. I anticipate a sparky dialogue between Paul, Wimber and Koyama, that during its course may throw light not only back on the apostle Paul, but also forward onto our expectations of mission.

1.4 Definition of terms

I shall use the word “missionary” in a fairly narrow sense. I recognise of course that mission is an activity of the whole church rather than the preserve of a few individuals, and that consequently all Christians are somehow participants in the weakness/power dynamic which I intend to reflect on. However, the reflections in this paper will probably resonate more with those who, like Paul, believe themselves to have embraced ‘mission’ as a particular vocation.

The words “apostle” and “apostolic” will also feature prominently, and an entirely separate study could be conducted on the meaning of these words and their appropriacy (or inappropriacy) today. I must admit a measure of ambiguity here. Although ‘apostle’ is simply the Greek equivalent to the Latin root of ‘missionary’, the words nowadays are hardly interchangeable. Most missionaries are rightly reluctant to describe themselves as ‘apostles’, because of its traditional restriction to first-generation missionaries (1 Cor.1:9). However, many would appreciate that their ministries have some of the characteristics of ‘apostolic’ ministry as portrayed in the New Testament. As we read the New Testament we become aware that we share the commission, the commitment and the concerns of those first apostles, and hopefully this paper will foster rather than discourage our identification with Paul himself and willingness to learn from him.

1.5 Limitations

Some will ask whether it is appropriate at all to treat St. Paul as a model for missionaries today. In

¹ For convenience masculine pronouns are occasionally used, but gender-inclusivity is assumed

what sense is Paul's experience normative? In what sense did Paul's role as an 'apostle' make him unlike non-apostles? What degree of *continuity* is there between Jesus and Paul, Paul and the first century church, the first century church and the twenty-first century church? These questions, though labyrinthine, are absolutely valid and important.² They are also well outside the scope of this paper. We are already part of a conversation which is being carried on across the centuries between today's missionaries and the apostle Paul. There are a range of opinions regarding the nature of our identification with Paul, but for the purposes of this paper it is enough to accept the validity of the conversation itself, acknowledging that Paul's mode of missionary existence is *at least to some extent relevant* to our own.³ Participating in this conversation, I hope to understand Paul's mind on the conjoined themes of weakness and power, and then as it were to reflect his mindset back to him in the terminology peculiar to John Wimber and Kosuke Koyama.

There are of course many people whose input on this topic would be invaluable. Theologians and missionaries all over the world and across the denominational spectrum would doubtless have a great wealth of opinions and experiences to share, and this paper is a meagre offering in comparison. But it seemed good to me to focus simply on Wimber and Koyama, so that their distinctive voices might be clearly heard and appreciated.

If we acknowledge that Paul has something worthwhile to communicate to us, then why not use the whole Pauline corpus as our raw material, rather than a single epistle? This would admittedly be a more comprehensive method, and in some ways a more satisfactory one, but would demand a whole book to do it justice. Besides, there are advantages to limiting the study to 2 Corinthians. This letter represents the fullest and most explicit treatment of weakness and power which we have in Paul's epistles – the high-point of his thought development on this subject. Also, it comes out of one particular historical context⁴ so the unity and coherence of the argument is almost guaranteed. It is hard to systematize Paul at the best of times, writing as he does as a determinedly dialectic theologian, but by limiting the scope of this study we should get a reasonable 'snapshot' of his apostolic experience.

1.6 The protagonists

Two characters more different than John Wimber and Kosuke Koyama could hardly be imagined.

throughout.

² A popular introduction to these issues is Roland Allen, Missionary Methods – St Paul's or Ours

³ The Acts of the Apostles "was certainly meant to be something more than the romantic history of an exceptional man, doing exceptional things under exceptional circumstances...it was really intended to throw light on the path of those who should come after." (Allen, p.48)

⁴ There are those who claim that chapters 10-13 are from a separate, later epistle to chapters 1-9, the merits of which claim I cannot comment on. For the purposes of this paper I will treat 2 Corinthians

Wimber (1934 - 1997) came from California, was formerly a musician with the Righteous Brothers, and is best known as founder of the Vineyard movement and exponent of ‘power evangelism’.

Koyama (1929 -) is a Japanese theologian, who spent some years as a missionary in Thailand and has since made an important contribution to ‘Asian theology’. In terms of personality, background, culture, theology and style, the two men are worlds apart. However, each has had a significant impact on the field of missiology.

Underlying this study is a deep appreciation of the diversity within the Body of Christ. I am convinced of the need for openness to voices from beyond our denominational and cultural boundaries. Even as an ‘evangelical’ Christian, I have been profoundly challenged by individuals who, like Koyama, are resolutely non-evangelical. I am excited by the prospect of bringing together the insights of such completely different theologians as Wimber and Koyama – like opposing weather fronts they cause a kind of commotion but also a creative release of energy.⁵ This kind of commotion, this kind of energy, can only be good for us as we grapple with our mission in the world today.

CHAPTER TWO: SIGNS AND SKOLOPS

Power and weakness in the thought of Paul

as a unity, as Barnett and others are happy to do.

⁵ Both Wimber and Koyama espoused this kind of openness in their own attitudes and words. Koyama talks of the “boundary-breaking God” and recognizes a certain “God-given role” even in expressions of Christianity with which he is culturally or ideologically uncomfortable, while Wimber loved the whole church “from the bare feet and guitars to the bells and smells” (C. Wimber 1999:212) and “didn’t think of the Vineyard as anything more than one vegetable in the stew...He knew we were entrusted with something that was needed to provide that particular flavour, but it was nothing more than that.” (ibid)

2.1 Historical Background to 2 Corinthians

“When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor.12:10). Ernst Fuchs called these words of Paul “the most famous paradox in the New Testament.”⁶ However, this truth does not hang in a theological vacuum – it was first apprehended in a specific historical context, which I need to describe before turning to the text itself.

2.1.1 The situation

Paul evangelized Corinth around AD 50 and stayed there eighteen months, an unusually long time for him. After he left various errors sprang up in the young church, which Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians and in a visit to the church – the ‘painful visit’ (2 Cor.2:1-3, 12:14). The church was still strife-torn and Paul wrote another letter, now lost, a stinging rebuke which he soon regretted sending but which in fact caused real repentance in the church. But the victory was not complete; some outsiders calling themselves ‘apostles’ were challenging Paul’s authority and leading people astray (2 Cor.11:13-15). Paul’s response to these events provides the content for our 2 Corinthians, possibly written as two instalments (1-9, 10-13).

2.1.2 ‘Power religion’ in Corinth

Timothy Savage’s excellent survey of popular culture in Paul’s day yields some interesting results. The religious climate was dominated by the mystery cults, with their offer of power, ecstasy and miracles. “The great allure of the cults may be summed up in a few words: the visible show of divinity at work” (Savage 1996:29). People longed to see divine power, and Corinth was typical of the rest of the Roman Empire in this respect. The Corinthians “focussed on the benefits derived from religion, such as physical healing and powerful displays (cf. Dio Chrysostom *Orationes* 8.7-9), not on doctrine.” (Savage 1996:49). He also comments that “since the Corinthians were largely of servile descent they ...placed a higher emphasis on social prominence and self-display, on personal power and boasting.” (ibid. 50). They were more prone to ridicule the poor and humble. Paul’s approach to the Corinthians in his second letter to them makes much more sense when we bear in mind these prevailing attitudes to power and weakness.

2.1.3 The opponents

Who were Paul’s opponents in 2 Corinthians? They were almost certainly Jewish (11:22), ‘outsiders’

⁶ Cited by Bosch (1979:79)

(11:4) and they were preaching a different Jesus (11:4). They were intruding into Paul's sphere of ministry (10:12-18), were receiving financial support (11:12) and were heavy-handed in their dealings with the Corinthian church (11:18-20). "The pseudo-apostles wanted an impressive, dynamic, strong apostle, to commend an impressive, dynamic, strong Jesus to a secular culture which had no time for weaklings and still less for victims of crucifixion." (Clements 1994:198)

2.1.4 The criticisms

Influenced by their culture, and egged on by the 'false apostles', the Corinthians were criticizing Paul basically on four fronts: his reticence to boast, his unimpressive physical presence, his inferior speech and his refusal to take support.⁷ We have seen that boasting was an obsession in Corinthian society so Paul's refusal to exalt himself would have disappointed. Similarly, Paul is 'weak' compared with the outsiders now in their midst – this may refer to his physical illness, his meekness, his uninspiring appearance, or all of these. Paul's speech also falls short of the finely honed techniques of the rhetoricians and pneumatics. Similarly, his refusal of financial support is embarrassing, especially in a climate where prosperity and upward mobility were so valued. We shall see how in each case Paul turns their arguments upside-down, deliberately "adopting a position which represents the exact antithesis of what they would have desired in a religious leader" (Savage 1996:99)

2.1.5 Paul's experiences

Paul's emphasis in 2 Corinthians on *weakness* was therefore a deliberate corrective to what he saw as a worldly and triumphalistic view of religious leadership and experience. A.E. Harvey takes a slightly different approach, focussing on Paul rather than the Corinthians themselves. He stresses that "in order to understand some aspects of Paul's theology we need first to attend to certain elements in his biography" (Harvey 1996:1). At the start of the letter Paul mentions that he came close to death in Ephesus, a result either of severe illness or savage persecution. Harvey postulates that this experience in particular led Paul to his radically new understanding of power and weakness. Paul was near death on several occasions, we know, so I do not entirely understand Harvey's emphasis on the enigmatic Ephesus incident, but his appreciation of the 'biographical' background to 2 Corinthians complements nicely Savage's concentration on the 'sociological' background. We will need to be aware of both as we read the text.

2.2 *Word-studies: ασθενεια and δυναμις*

2.2.1 δυναμις in the New Testament

⁷ These are Savage's categories (1996:54-99)

The primary meaning of δυναμις in the New Testament is *power, might, strength, force*. It is an attribute of God, indeed God is sometimes referred to simply as δυναμις (Mt.26:64; Mk 14:62). δυναμις is often connected with the Holy Spirit (Lk.4:14; Acts 1:8; Rom.15:13,19), hence the expression πνευμα δυναμεως (2 Tim.1:7), *spirit of power*.

The believers are εν παση δυναμει δυναμουμενοι, *equipped with all power* (Col.1:11 - here for the purpose of 'great endurance and patience'; cf. Eph.1:19; 3:20). In 1 Cor.1:24 δυναμις is also especially the power that works wonders (Mt.14:2; Mk.6:14; 1 Cor.12:28f., Lk.9:1). Therefore sometimes the word means *deed of power, miracle or wonder*, usually found as the plural δυναμεις (Mt.7:22; 11:20f; Lk.10:13; 19:37; Gal.3:5). In this case it often pairs with σημεια (2 Th.2:9; Acts 2:22; Hb.2:4), *signs and wonders*.

In addition, δυναμις is occasionally translated *ability or capability* in a human sense (Mt.25:15), as *resources or wealth* (Rev.18:3), or as *power* in the sense of a personal supernatural spirit or angel (Rom.8:38; 1 Cor.15:24; Eph.1:21).

2.2.2 δυναμις in 2 Corinthians

Paul's use of δυναμις in 2 Corinthians reflects the range of meanings above. Three times δυναμις means *ability* in a human sense: in 1:8, describing hardships in Asia, Paul talks of having been stretched *beyond our ability* (υπερ δυναμιν) *to endure*; in 8:3 the Macedonian churches gave *as much as they were able* (κατα δυναμιν) and even *beyond their ability* (παρα δυναμιν).

However the focus of this letter is not on human ability but on the power of God (δυναμις θεου). In 4:7, 6:7 and 10:4 δυναμις refers to the power of God as a characteristic of Paul's ministry. In 4:7 the image of 'treasure in jars of clay' indicates that *this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us*. 10:4 makes a similar contrast, here between the weapons of the world and the weapons we fight with, which have *divine power* to demolish strongholds. In 6:7, δυναμις θεου is one amongst several circumstantial factors in the authentic ministry of the servant of God.

Chapters 12 and 13 describe the dynamic by which God's power rests on his ministers, and two key passages 12:7-10 and 13:2-4 will be dealt with in more detail. The implications of 12:12, where Paul uses δυναμεις in the sense of *miracles* will also be considered.

2.2.3 ασθενεια in the New Testament

ασθενεια means *weakness*. In its most literal (albeit rarer) sense it refers to bodily weakness, commonly sickness or disease. Hence, Jesus healed people of their ασθενεια (Lk.5:15; Jn.5:5; 11:4) and Paul urges Timothy to drink wine for his ασθενεια (1 Tim.5:23).

However, the word is much more commonly used in a non-literal sense. It is the opposite of δυνάμις (1 Cor.15:43). It can relate to human frailty (1 Cor.2:3, applied to Christ in Heb.5:2), and can sometimes be entirely negative in connotation: weakness in judgement (Rom.6:19) or lack of religious insight (Rom.8:26).

2.2.4 ασθενεια in 2 Corinthians

It will be important to recognise the distinctive character of ασθενεια in 2 Corinthians. The noun occurs six times in the letter; three of those are plural. In 11:30 Paul declares, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (lit. *the things of my weakness* (τα της ασθενειας μου)). What kind of weakness is this? The statement is framed by *specific instances* of weakness, a catalogue of hardships (11:23-29) and mention of his ignominious escape from Damascus (11:32-33).

12:1-10 has ασθενεια or ασθενειαι no less than four times:

v.5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

v.9 But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

v.10 That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

There is no hint that ασθενεια in these cases connotes unresponsiveness to God or defects in character; nor human weakness in the sense of the tendency to sin. Moreover, it is not to be equated with being generally pathetic. Paul does not endorse the charge of some in the church that he is ασθενης (NIV “unimpressive”) in person, and by listing his ασθενειαι, “Paul is not saying that he is a weak or insipid or generally debilitated person” (Barnett 1997, 573). Verse 9 has the singular ασθενεια to balance the singular δυνάμις, but otherwise Paul speaks of *weaknesses*. The weaknesses are the *particular aspects of suffering and persecution* which Paul has personally encountered in his ministry, epitomised by the thorn (12:7-10) and detailed in his lists of trials (4:8-10; 6:4-10; 11:23-29).

13:4 applies this same notion of weakness to Christ, who was crucified *in weakness* (ἐξ ασθενειας) and yet is *not* weak (οὐκ ασθενει) in dealing with the church. In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s conception of weakness is christological.

2.3 Key passages

The following passages are those which deal with these key themes of weakness and power, and

further illuminate the distinctive characters of weakness and power in 2 Corinthians.

2.3.1 The sufferings of an apostle (11:23-33)

On three occasions in the letter, Paul indulges in a catalogue of his trials (4:8-10, 6:4-10, 11:23-33), but by far the most comprehensive is the last of these three, in the context of what is usually called ‘the Fool’s Speech’. Paul is talking as a Fool (vv.16, 23), a common enough rhetorical ‘mouthpiece’ through which ancient writers could say things which they might otherwise not dare to say. His aim is to parody but also to correct the claims of his opponents. Paul uses their style of speaking - boasting and triumphalism, but the content of his boasting is completely the reverse of the false apostles’, who were evidently boasting in their Jewish heritage and their extraordinary accomplishments and experiences.

Barnett uses the word ‘antitriumphalism’ to sum up this passage, which is especially apt when we view it alongside such texts as Augustus’ *Res Gestae*, which includes statistics of his military accomplishments and honours: “Twice I received triumphal orations. Three times I received *curule* triumphs. Twenty times and one did I receive the appellation of imperator.”⁸ How different is Paul’s record of service:

Five times I took thirty-nine lashes from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I have spent adrift on the open sea. During my frequent journeys I have been exposed to dangers from rivers, dangers from brigands, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the town and in the country, dangers at sea, dangers at the hands of false brothers... (2 Cor. 11:24-26)

The tribulations he lists were typical of itinerant mission – travel in his day involved facing the dangers of shipwreck, robbery and flooded rivers. Equally prominent are the punishments meted out to him by both the Jewish and Roman authorities – the thirty-nine lashes and beatings with rods. He adds to this the pastoral anxieties felt for the churches he has planted. Such lists are also found in the writings of Stoic and Cynic philosophers⁹, but with important differences: the philosophers catalogued their ordeals to prove their strength and equanimity, whereas Paul offers his ordeals as evidence of a life lived in weaknesses and humiliations.

As if to reinforce this impression, Paul ends the list with a little story which is obviously and deliberately *antitriumphalistic* – his ignominious escape from the siege of Damascus by being lowered over a wall in what was probably a fish basket. This parodies the Roman *corona muralis*, an honour

⁸ *Res Gestae* 4, cited by Barnett, p.540

⁹ *constantia* and *firmitas* were qualities commended by Seneca: John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel* pp. 62-5 (Atlanta, GA, 1988)

awarded to the first soldier to go *up* over the wall during the siege of an enemy city. Paul's role as 'servant of Christ' is neither heroic nor impressive. It involves pain, danger, rejection and heartache.

In his comments on this passage, Barnett refers back to 2:14, which is an equally profound and deliberately antitriumphalistic metaphor:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

A Roman triumphal procession is probably in view here, with God as the leader. It seems to be an optimistic, military image, until we recognize that Paul numbers himself among the *captives* in the procession, weak, beaten and humiliated. Bosch notices a further twist: "Usually of course, such captives are a sorry sight and form a wretched procession of despondent and spiritless people. But here Paul presents the picture of a paradox – one of the many in this letter – for this captive is rejoicing! He gives glory to God for the hardships of his captivity!" (Bosch 1979:28) With a deft change of direction, Paul then sees himself as the fragrance being strewn around by the incense-bearers who accompanied such processions – the 'fragrance' of the knowledge of God.

2.3.2 The 'skolops' of an apostle 2 Cor. 12:7-10

The most important passage for our study is without doubt 12:7-10. Here Paul makes more explicit the relationship between *δυναμις* and *ασθενεια*. He was given a 'thorn in his flesh' to torment him, prayed three times to the Lord to take it away, but instead received the answer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In the light of this experience, Paul sees his weaknesses as something to be boasted about, delighted in even (*ευδοκω*), because he now sees them as a precondition for experiencing the power of God. "When I am weak, I am strong." So much is clear, but the attempt to delve deeper is fraught with difficulty; this passage is in fact one of the most widely debated in the New Testament.

Not least among the difficulties is the identity of the 'thorn in the flesh' (*σκολοπος τη σαρκι*). What exactly was it? The word *σκολοψ* could have been used to refer to either a physical defect, or to a particularly obnoxious opponent, and interpreters ancient and modern have tended to fall into one of these two broad categories.¹⁰

What can be said for sure about the thorn in the flesh? It started painning Paul some time after the "surpassingly great revelations" of verses 1-6, and was intended to keep him from becoming conceited

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 for a more thorough discussion of this question.

on account of them. It was still with him at the time of him writing (κολαφίζειν is present tense). Paul had no doubt that the thorn was basically evil, a messenger of Satan. However, he also saw the hand of God behind the circumstance, using in verse 7 a *divine passive*, εδοθη (was given). Interestingly enough, that verb is usually used in Pauline literature about the bestowing of God's *favour* (cf. Gal.3:21; Eph.3:8; 5:19; 1 Tim.4:14 – Martin 1986:412). But here God has given the thorn in order *to keep Paul weak*.

At the time, Paul did not understand that his thorn was in any sense God-given and he turned to the Lord in prayer, pleading that it be removed. Christ's answer to him is not only the climax of this section but also "the summit of the epistle...from this vantage point the entire range of Paul's apostleship is seen in focus." (Hughes 1962:451): *My grace is sufficient for you, for (my) power is made perfect in weakness*. There is wide agreement that it is proper to see δυναμις and χαρις as synonyms here. James Ryle's work on χαρις is pertinent - he defines grace in the New Testament as "the empowering presence of God, enabling us to be who God created us to be and to do what he has called us to do" - a dynamic view of grace which fits well with Paul's thought here. Perhaps *made perfect* (NIV) with its moral connotations is misleading; τελειται speaks rather of fulfillment, of bringing to completion (Martin 1986:420). We may say that God's power working in and through Paul is *at its most powerful* when Paul himself is in a state of weakness.

12:9b. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Paul himself now broadens the scope of this experience to cover *all his weaknesses*. The implication must be that Christ's answer to Paul has for him a relevance beyond just the 'thorn in the flesh'; Paul has learnt a more general rule regarding power and weakness. If God's power is most powerful in Paul's weakness, then Paul will not try to cover up or compensate for his weaknesses. Rather he will accept them and be real about them, indeed *boast about them* (καυχησομαι εν ταις ασθεναις μου) as the circumstance of an authentic empowering and the mark of being a true God-bearer. "For it is only when he is conscious of his own weakness, that is, when he is not seeking to manipulate or direct the power of God in any way - only then (note again the ινα) can God's grace and power fully rest upon him and manifest itself through him." (Dunn 1975:330)

The verb επισκηνοση (from επισκηνοσν) is worth some attention. The Greek root σκην- clearly suggests (sakan), the Hebrew root for "abide" (Martin 1986:421). The OT-Jewish term (s^ekinah) described the presence of God dwelling with the people (Exod.40:34). Therefore Paul's use of επισκηνοσν is indeed a "bold metaphor" (Plummer 1915:355). Christ's presence alighting on Paul in his weakness resonates unmistakably with the coming of the s^ekinah-glory among the people of God. There is some discussion about the prefix επι- ; does it convey the idea that Christ's power actually comes down on Paul? Or is the power of Christ in Paul simply 'revealed' more clearly in situations of weakness? We need to admit that the mechanics of empowering are not within the scope

of this passage, but also to take seriously the *s^ekinah* image evoked by Paul's choice of words – this image of God's presence alighting on and filling the tent of human weakness. It is almost certainly not enough to give ἀσθενεῖα here a *purely* revelatory function (so Bultmann: "By discerning weakness, a person discovers the power within", cited by Martin 1986:422). Rather, when he realizes his own weakness and powerlessness, Paul *receives* sufficient power *from without* to enable him.

12:10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Here Paul makes explicit a link between the unremoved thorn and the other sufferings incurred in his ministry (see on 11:23-30). Through the experience of grace in one particular weakness, Paul has learned to appreciate (NIV "delight in" possibly too strong) the other weaknesses which accompany mission - the insults, hardships, persecutions and 'tight corners' (στενοχωρίαίς, cf.6:4), not for their own sake but because in a unique way they provide the conditions for the manifest power of God.

Barnett highlights the phrase ὑπερ Χριστου, which in the NIV (above) seems to qualify the verb "I delight". He points out that the phrase in fact appears at the *end* of the list of hardships, qualifying *the weaknesses themselves* - those difficulties which Paul experiences in the course of his outreach are in a real sense "on behalf of Christ", "in Christ's place." We should note that the same phrase appears also in 5:20 where Paul urges people ὑπερ Χριστου to be reconciled to God. "As Christ's ambassador and apostle, Paul 'beseeches' in Christ's place and suffers in Christ's place. Christ's sufferings are replicated and historically extended in the sufferings or *weaknesses* of his apostle..." (Barnett 1997:576) And just as the weaknesses are like those experienced by Christ, the power to endure them and minister within them is also like that experienced by Christ.

The picture emerging is of Christ as *the archetype for power in weakness* and of Paul continuing this mode of being in his own life and ministry. Christ's weaknesses were the context for receiving and displaying the power of God, a dynamic which found its most poignant expression in the cross. The power which he drew on for the benefit of others, he would not use for himself. "He saved others, himself he cannot save!" (Mark 15:31). Paul, a communicator of the gospel of Christ, finds himself experiencing the same phenomenon of power in weakness; he is perplexed at first, and driven close to desperation, but finally realises that his own weaknesses are a necessary aspect of authentically *Christ-ian* power.

In this light we can better understand Paul's 'treasure in jars of clay' idea in chapter 4, his claim that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to *show* that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (4:7). That is to say, only in weakness can divine power be recognised as such (Dunn 1975:329). Paul may have experienced something of this when he first came to Corinth (1Cor.2:3ff.) and "saw the gospel working powerfully not *despite* but *in* and *through* his weaknesses - hence he characterises the *kerygma* as the gospel of the weakness of God (1 Cor.1:25)" (Dunn 1975:330).

2.3.3 The signs of an apostle (12:12)

2 Cor.12:12

τα μεν σημεια του αποστολου κατειργασθη εν υμιν εν παση υπομονη,
σημειοις τε και τερασι και δυναμεσι.

NIV The things that mark an apostle - signs, wonders and miracles - were done among you with great perseverance.

Following so shortly after Paul's insistence that he will boast only in his weaknesses, this verse comes as something of a surprise. "Does Paul have some afterthoughts?" (Fee 1994:354). How are we to understand the sudden introduction of signs and wonders into the argument?

"Signs and wonders" is a common phrase in the OT, often used in connection with the exodus¹¹, and to this duo Paul adds δυναμις, translated variously as 'miracles' or 'deeds of power', which occurs regularly in the NT for miracles of many kinds.¹² The same trio is also found in Acts 2:22 (*Jesus of Nazareth was a man "accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs"*), 2 Thess.2:9 (where they will accompany the coming of the lawless one) and Heb.2:4 (where they support the proclamation of the gospel).

Paul now seems to be citing signs, wonders and deeds of power as marks of apostleship, *the signs of an apostle*. Martin and others recoil from this suggestion, because it apparently goes against Paul's teaching of chaps.11-13. He has already accredited his ministry with reference to his sufferings and weaknesses. Martin follows the NEB therefore in translating the verse as follows: "The things that mark an apostle were done among you with the utmost endurance, *along with* signs, wonders and miracles." 'The things that mark an apostle' are suffering and changed lives, with signs and wonders almost an irrelevance.

There are significant problems with Martin's approach, distorting as it does the plainer meaning of the verse. Grammatically, σημειοις τε και τερασι και δυναμεσι (signs and wonders and deeds of power) are instrumental datives best translated with something like '*by means of* signs, wonders and miracles' (so Barnett 1997:580; Fee 1994:354). Therefore most translations move this clause to a position next to τα μεν σημεια του αποστολου (so NIV text above).

By denoting his miracles as "the signs of an apostle", is Paul diluting (or indeed flatly contradicting) what he has put forward about his weaknesses? The *context* of this verse is crucial here. In v.11 Paul admits that he has played the role of the fool, but they (the Corinthian Christians) have forced him into commending himself, presumably by their criticism of him. Moreover, they should have been commending him *themselves*, because he was demonstrably "in no way inferior to the super-apostles"

¹¹ As in Exod.7:3; 1:9, 10; 3:20; 8:23; 10:1, 2; 15:11; Num.14:21; Deut.4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; Josh.3:5; 24:17; Ps.135:9; Neh.9:10; Jer.32:21

¹² As in e.g. 1 Cor.12:10, 28, 29; Gal.3:5

in terms of his ministry among them. The miraculous deeds *were* a feature of his ministry and he is not ashamed of that; indeed they were was a sign of God's accreditation of him (just as in Acts 2:22 they were a sign of God's accreditation of Jesus). The tone of the whole passage 12:11-13 is one of genuine puzzlement: How *were* the Corinthians inferior, except that Paul supported himself there? Because of the manifestly divine character of his mission in Corinth, Paul would naturally expect to be commended rather than criticised.

However, in the same passage, Paul qualifies his claim to the miraculous in three ways: he makes very clear that the miracles were done by *God* (κατεργασθη is another 'divine passive'), that he in himself is "nothing" (v.11) and that even the signs and wonders were done *in the context of the utmost endurance* (εν παση υπομονη, NIV has *perseverance*).¹³ Dunn's conclusion is this: "In the analysis of religious experience which his own ministry forced on [Paul], *that which he focussed upon as distinctively Christian was charismatic power in and through human weakness*" (330).

It is quite evident that "Paul sees no tension at all between the Spirit's activity in his ministry in this way and his own personal weaknesses about which he has been boasting" (Fee, 356). His preaching in Corinth was undoubtedly accompanied by a broad range of 'deeds of power'.

Modern commentators have found it hard to reconcile a wonder-working Paul with a weak, suffering Paul, and so have tended to emphasise one at the expense of the other, and *this was equally the case among Paul's contemporaries*. What his detractors obviously could not believe was that the worker of such deeds was *himself* such a "weak" (ασθενης – NIV has "unimpressive") character.¹⁴ As we have seen, Corinthian religion knew a great deal about 'power'. The Christians there, influenced as they were by the prevailing "power religions" pedalled on every street-corner, probably had an over-realised eschatology; they "thought of the Spirit as the power of the already which swallows up the not yet in forceful speech and action" (Dunn 1975:330). But in Paul's experience, "the Spirit of Christ had not obliterated the antithesis of power and weakness, he had sharpened it." (ibid. 330). Precisely this antithesis is what he is struggling to convey in 2 Corinthians. It is surely striking that one of the clearest references in the Pauline corpus to the power of God being manifest in miraculous ways is found in the context of the clearest reference to the value of weakness in ministry. We should not be too quick to write off one or the other as an aberration in Paul's logic, but rather hold them in creative tension.

¹³ Romans 15:18-19 provides an important parallel to the verse under discussion; Paul unashamedly counts his miracles as an outworking of the Spirit's power in his ministry, resulting in obedience to God among the Gentiles, while also making very clear that he himself is not the author or director of this power: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done - by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit."

¹⁴ cf. Jervell "He is an ailing miracle worker, an ailing miraculous healer, and the miracle worker

2.3.4 The stigmata of an apostle (13:1-10, 4:10-11)

A 13:1-10

As Paul begins to sign off, he expresses the hope that he will not have to be harsh with the Corinthians when he visits them for the third time, yet he will certainly discipline those who need it. In the context of this warning, Paul gives one last important insight into his thinking about power and weakness:

13:2b-4 On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

The precise logic of Paul's argument is difficult to follow; perhaps Dunn gets closest to Paul's mind on this matter when he points out that in responding to the Corinthians' challenge for proof that Christ is speaking through him, Paul says "We are weak in him" rather than, "We are weak in ourselves but strong in him." Christ remains the Crucified even though he now lives by the power of God, and both the dying and the rising have become characteristic of Paul's Christian experience. That is, "*The character of the experience in which Christ speaks through a man is determined by the character of the Christ who speaks*" (Dunn 1975:331).

It is likely that the Corinthians had a very triumphalistic view of Christ, to the point of minimising his earthly ministry and death (Barnett 1997:604). Christ was known among them as the Powerful One, the Exalted One. There may even be a hint of irony in verse 3b here: "Indeed, Christ is mightily among you, as you claim!" (Martin 1986:474). Paul complements this view with its essential corollary, the shocking statement, "To be sure, he was crucified in weakness." In Paul's thought the cross and the resurrection simply cannot be separated: "as soon as the exalted Christ is separated from the crucified Jesus, charismatic experience loses its distinctively Christian yardstick" (Dunn 1975: 331). Martin endorses this crucial truth:

The cross is not simply a past happening; it is caught up in his present, risen life where he remains as the crucified one, as the crucified Jesus is now the risen Lord (see Martin, *carmen Christi*). The cross is not a station on the way to his final glory, but the esse of that lordship, so that always his lordly power is conditioned by his continuing weakness, obedience and humility. (Martin 1986:475)

In the context of this paper it is impossible to overestimate the significance of this realization. Dunn explains the implications for Christian existence: "*To experience the exalted Christ therefore is to*

cannot remove this ailment", cited by Fee, 357

experience not merely new life but new life which is life through death, life out of death, and which always retains that character” (Dunn 1975: 331). The power Paul experiences in his ministry is the power of the risen Christ - power for endurance (12:9), power for signs, wonders and miracles (12:12), and power for service (13:4). The sufferings he experiences are the sufferings of the crucified Christ, experienced in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions and in difficulties of every kind. “This is why the *δυναμις* of Christ will be effectual in Paul who is despised as *ασθενης* and actually lives in *ασθενεια*, namely that with Christ himself *ασθενεια* and *δυναμις* are bound up together.” (Bultmann, cited by Martin 1986:245)

B 4:10-11

We have returned to the realization that Paul’s understanding of power and weakness in his own life is Christological to the core. One of the most forceful and memorable expressions of this understanding comes at the end of the first ‘tribulation list’ (4:8-10):

v.10-11 We always bear in our body the dying (*νεκρωσις*¹⁵) of Jesus, so that (*ινα*) the life too of Jesus may be displayed in our mortal existence. For we as living persons we are always being handed over¹⁶ to death for the sake of Jesus, so that (*ινα*) the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our mortal nature.

Dunn identifies two thoughts here. Firstly, suffering (vv.8-9) indicates that the power of death is asserting itself over its continuing domain (the mortal body). Secondly, if the life of Jesus is to achieve visible expression in the believer’s life, that can only be through the body. “These two thoughts are linked by *ινα* – the life of Jesus manifests itself *precisely in and through* the dying of the body.” (Dunn, p.328) Paul’s experience of power in weakness is not merely *like* that of Jesus, rather “it is experience which at all characteristic and distinctive points is *derived* from Jesus the Lord, and which only makes sense when this *derivative and dependent* character is recognized” (ibid. 341). Paul’s Christian life is unmistakably and unashamedly a *stigmatized* life.

2.4 Summary

Here are some of the key points which have emerged from this brief study of Paul:

- Paul is continually stretched beyond his human ability (*υπερ δυναμιν*) and his mission is characterized by the power of God (*δυναμις θεου*).
- This power is received in the context of remarkable weaknesses (*ασθενεια*). As God’s glory

¹⁵ *νεκρωσις* indicates “the condition of a corpse shortly before as well as after, the moment of death” (Harvey 1996:58) – a continuous state of dying, an aspect of the Christian’s solidarity with Christ.

¹⁶ *παραδιδοναι* (‘handed over’) is often used of Jesus’ destiny in the Gospels; its use here suggests that Paul is ‘destined’ to suffer in a similar way as part of God’s plan.

filled the tabernacle, so God's power fills the tent of Paul's weakness.

- Because weakness is the context, the origin of the power is manifestly divine.
- One aspect of this power is the demonstration the gospel with signs and wonders, but this still in the context of *ασθενεια*, "charismatic power in and through human weakness" (Dunn).
- Paul's experience of power through weakness is completely derived from Christ, Crucified and Risen. Both his suffering and his ministry are on behalf of Christ (*υπερ Χριστου*) and reflect Christ. Therefore, Paul's ministry is authentically and demonstrably Christ-ian.

CHAPTER THREE: BROKENNESS AND EMBRACE

The missiology of Kosuke Koyama

Kosuke Koyama is a gentle and extremely gracious Christian thinker, who has made a significant contribution not just to Asian theology but to the thinking and practice of the wider church. His books are profoundly God-centred but also firmly rooted in historical events, situations and people. Koyama has provided missiologists with a range of enduring metaphors and analogies which describe the appropriate mode of missionary existence.

In this chapter I quote from Koyama's four published books, also from lectures given by Koyama at a conference in April 2001 and personal dialogue with him on the subject of weakness and power.

3.1 Influences on Kosuke Koyama

Koyama's Japanese nationality and his experience of growing up in post-war Japan have had a great impact on the man. He was fifteen when Tokyo, including the reputedly invulnerable 'palace of the divine emperor', was razed to the ground by bombs. He was sixteen when nuclear bombs obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and when Kitamori's book *The Pain of God* was first published. These experiences are evidently etched on Koyama's mind – he recognises Japan as a country which has both perpetrated and experienced tremendous suffering, and his theology is shot through with a profound awareness of the depth of human pain. It affects every aspect of his theology – discussing comparative

religion, for example, he repeated several times, “Let the true religion be one that can stop ethnic cleansing.”¹⁷

Whilst not intending to analyse Dr. Kitamori’s theology of the pain of God, which deserves to be studied in its own right, his influence on his student Koyama needs to be recognised, and is openly acknowledged in the books.¹⁸ To the broken nation of Japan and her shaken people, Kitamori spoke the message of God who “resolves our human pain by his own”.¹⁹ Kitamori saw suffering as *the* comprehensive principle in God’s dealings with men, and this became a preoccupation of his student, too. The ‘re-rooting of theology in the pain of God’ energizes Koyama’s interpretation of Paul and his distinctive missiology.

Theologically, Koyama builds not only on Kitamori but on a whole tradition of Asian theology. “Perhaps the fundamental contribution of the theology in Asia to the church universal is to describe, in her own language, at what points theology should stumble!” (1974:231) However, Koyama’s is an Asian mindset exposed to American culture and ethos, having lived in the USA for many years and married into an American family. He seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards the country, a mixture of appreciation and dismay. With regard to our topic of power and weakness, he is uncomfortable with the language of strength, sufficiency, efficiency and technology, and rejects in all its forms the mindset which he calls the “centre complex” – a mindset characterised by superiority and exclusivity. “In our modern context, we are tempted to speak more positively about an unbroken Christ, a powerful, conquering Christ...a strong Western civilization and the ‘weak’ Christ cannot be reconciled harmoniously. Christ must become ‘strong’. A strong United States and a strong Christ!” (Koyama: 1984, p.242). This kind of unease surfaces regularly in Koyama’s books and conversation.

3.2 Koyama’s Missiology

3.2.1 Christ - God’s ‘going out’

Koyama makes the Christ event the centre of his thought. In a brief survey of salvation history in *Waterbuffalo Theology*²⁰ (chapter 15), he reflects on passages like Phil.2:5-11 and 2 Cor.8:9, emphasising at first the *kenotic* character of Christ’s mission, how in so many ways he became poor for our sake. He tells of a ‘reconciliation-God’ willing to become ‘ebed-God’. “Is there anything, any situation greater, more amazing, more life-giving, than this, God’s ‘going out’?” (Koyama 1974, 178).

¹⁷ Lecture notes, ‘The Running God’ - Worcester, UK, April 2001

¹⁸ Koyama calls Kitamori “my revered teacher at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary”

¹⁹ *Theology of the Pain of God*, p.20, cited by Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, p.116

²⁰ The phrase “Waterbuffalo Theology” sums up his distinctively down to earth missiology, his awareness that the people to whom he sought to bring the gospel in Thailand spend most of their time with waterbuffaloes in the rice field. “The waterbuffaloes tell me that I must preach to these farmers in the simplest sentence structure and thought development. They remind me to discard all abstract

Moreover, Jesus' mission of reconciliation involves obedience all the way to death - "His poverty assumes incomparable depth at the death on the cross" (1974:180); "The word of the cross is the word that summarizes the mission of Jesus Christ" (1974:180). By extension, "Let us call our total missiology-theology or theology-missiology theology of the cross." (1974:185)

3.2.2 Mission - Abrahamic and Pauline 'going out'

In the light of Jesus' going out from heaven, all other 'goings out' in God's election find their ultimate meaning. Therefore Abraham, for example, in his going out from Ur, leaving his country, his kindred and his father's house (Gen.12:1), is a goer-out in the mould of Jesus, and like Jesus he finds that the life he is called to is a hard one.

Mission, according to Koyama, is the "concretization of God's love in history", or as he now like to phrase it "the *agapization* of space and time"²¹. The Christian message is more than an idea, it is an event and an "experience of emancipation", reaching its ultimate form in the incarnation of the Son. Therefore the message cannot be communicated as just an idea - "the only way to speak about the crucified and risen name is by participating in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection." (1976:83). The message needs to be incarnated. At its heart, *Waterbuffalo Theology* is not concerned with the techniques or methodology of mission, but with the mindset of the missionary. We are not called to the *task* of communication. We are called to *be* communicators. "The theology of the word of the cross must be expressed and communicated bodily" (1974:181).

While Koyama's attitude to Paul's thought is generally ambivalent, his endorsement of Paul's apostolic *lifestyle* is absolute. He is evidently gripped by the implications of 2 Corinthians, the vision of an apostolic existence defined in terms of the paradoxes dead/alive, lost/found, reviled/bless, persecuted/ endure. He quotes 2 Cor.11:22-28 extensively, which as we have seen details the grim reality of Paul's life. Koyama exclaims "What a life! Yes! But this life *is* the apostolic life!" (1974:180) While the apostle is stammering his believing reaction to 'Jesus Christ and him crucified', he is himself participating in *that* kind of life...he *experiences* the word of the cross" (1974:181).

Kosuke Koyama commends the Pauline model to the attention of the church today: "I am suggesting something more than some adjustments to be made in our method of evangelism. I am stating the need for recovery and renewal of the apostolic character of the church" (1974:183). His books, in particular *No Handle on the Cross*, describe what this contemporary apostolic life should look like. His language is colourful and memorable, and the vision which emerges is a compelling one.

3.3 Key Koyama-isms

ideas and to use exclusively objects that are immediately tangible" (Koyama 1974, vii).

3.3.1 Crucified mind and Crusading mind

These are important concepts for Koyama. *Waterbuffalo Theology* reaches its climax in his portrayal of the ‘crucified mind’, “a mind of self-denial based on the self-denial of Christ” (1974, p.209). *No Handle on the Cross* expands and develops this theme, indeed is subtitled *An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind*. He puts it forward as the correct mode of being for Christian church, and the only appropriate attitude in mission. “The apostolic mind is primarily and fundamentally the crucified mind, not the crusading mind.” (1979:40) Maybe this is why Koyama nowadays seldom uses the word ‘missionary’ – the word is already ‘spoiled’ for him by its ‘crusading’ connotations.

Meditating on the crucified mind, Koyama refers to the ‘spat-upon’ Jesus Christ, which points to ‘spat-upon bishops’, ‘spat-upon theology’, ‘spat-upon evangelism’ and ‘spat-upon churches’. That the very pursuit of mission should have the quality of ‘spat-upon’ is a challenge we cannot ignore. How much of our missiology really reflects this? The slave of Christ bears on his body the *stigma* of Christ.²² “The mark of self-denial is the fundamental qualification for being an evangelist.” (1976:33)

Can Christians who do not involve themselves in the great ‘discomfort’ of the nailed Christ, point to the source of all comfort? Isn’t it true that precisely because they are comforted by the crucified Lord, they are inescapably involved in the ‘discomfort’ of the crucified Lord? (Koyama 1974:234)

3.3.2 Answer theology and invitation theology

Koyama disapproves of the oft-heard slogan “Jesus is the Answer”. “Jesus is not a Coca Cola machine, where you put money in the slot and the can drops out.”²³ The best theology according to him is not ‘answer theology’ but ‘invitation theology’. Similarly, God stories often conclude not with a ‘happy ending’ but with a ‘trust ending.’

Koyama writes about the “finger of God that does not work comprehensively”. He notes that in Bethzaha there was ‘a multitude of invalids, blind lame, paralysed’, yet Jesus healed only one man ‘who had been ill for thirty-eight years.’ (John 5:2-9) Jesus said, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ (John 11:43) but he did not say ‘all dead come out with Lazarus!’ Despite occasions when Jesus healed ‘every disease and infirmity’ (Matt.4:23-4), “mankind is not finally and comprehensively freed from every disease and infirmity” (1976:70). “God does not grab history, God penetrates history” (ibid. 71).

²¹ Lecture notes, Worcester, UK, April 2001

²² Koyama cites Gal.6:17

²³ Lecture notes, Worcester, UK, April 2001

I asked Koyama what he thought of ‘power evangelism’, but he was uneasy with this kind of language. “Power comes by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God,” he said. “Power does flow through us, but it happens almost unconsciously.” *In Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, he writes “Religion can degenerate to magic when the value it espouses is promised quickly and directly.” (1984, p.260)

3.3.3 Cross and Lunchbox

No Handle on the Cross begins with the enigmatic question: “In following [Jesus], why is it necessary to take up a cross?...Why not a lunchbox?” (1976:1) He invites us to meditate on this image. The lunchbox is “attractively shaped”, “psychologically and physically strengthening”, not heavy, and has “a neat handle for carrying” (1976:1-2). It symbolizes “our resourcefulness, spiritual and mental energy, high-powered substantial theology, good honest thinking, careful planning and sacred commitment to our faith” (1976:2).

The contrast is between the cross and the lunch-box: an extremely inconvenient thing to carry and an extremely convenient thing to carry (‘with a handle’); an ugly thing to carry and an attractive thing to carry; slow movement and fast movement; inefficiency and efficiency; insecurity and security; heavy-footedness and light-footedness; pain and glory; self-denial and self-assertion. (Koyama 1976:2)

3.3.4 Technology and theology

“The basic difference between technology and theology is that the former gives us both an ‘engine’ and a ‘handle’, whereas the latter has an ‘engine’ but no ‘handle’.” (1976:3) Koyama does not deny the power of God, but he refuses any attempt to control it. He uses the word ‘resourcefulness’ in a predominantly negative sense to refer to our own ways of doing things or our efforts to force God’s hand in some way. ‘Resourcefulness’ too must be crucified. “In the perspective of mission together in the six continents we urgently need ecumenical meditation on the theology of crucified resourcefulness” (1976:5).

3.3.5 Brokenness

Twenty-five years after the publishing of *No Handle on the Cross*, Koyama is still gripped by his vision of the ‘crucified mind’ but is using slightly different terminology to express his meaning. The theology of the cross is a theology of *brokenness*.

Herbert Brand

Koyama talked about how his grandfather was drawn to Christ by a missionary from Cambridge, England, named Herbert Brand. His grandfather encountered Mr Brand preaching on the streets of Tokyo. “Tokyo space is very different to Cambridge space, but Mr Brand did his best to vitalize that

space with sacrament.” Koyama’s grandfather was impressed by the content of the message – the missionary in no way denigrated Japan or Japanese culture or religion; instead he talked about Jesus. But it was the delivery which struck him most - Herbert Brand spoke in *broken Japanese*. Koyama suggests that if the Japanese had flowed fluently, his grandfather would have walked on by. It was the quality of brokenness which arrested him. “Brokenness is a most creative thing. It leads to invitation and to embrace.”²⁴

Brokenness and embrace

Koyama is intrigued by Jesus’ breaking of the bread at the Last Supper. When you break something, ‘space’ appears. The gesture of breaking bread creates space; it is like an invitation to an embrace. “This is my body – broken for you” is a ‘spacious and inviting’ proposal. It is also a costly one. “Brokenness has deep communion with agape.”²⁵

God himself has a certain quality of ‘brokenness’. God is broken precisely because he is in relationship with humanity. An important text for Koyama is Hosea 11:8, where God declares “My mind is turning over within me. My emotions are agitated altogether.”

The church needs a theology of brokenness, and a missiology of brokenness. Evangelism is not breaking someone else (that Koyama calls proselytization); rather it is “breaking yourself and inviting someone into the space that appears.” I asked Koyama to explain this, and he hesitated because he was aware that this approach can sound akin to masochism. “It isn’t that,” he assured me. “It is about vulnerability. Go, but make yourself vulnerable. Weakness means being willing to be hurt. Go and be vulnerable...”

3.4 Reflections on Koyama

I admit to being profoundly impressed by Koyama’s thought and character. He provides a corrective to the ‘crusading’ mindset and language which are still so prevalent (perhaps especially in the West) and to the uncrucified ‘resourcefulness’ of so much of our activity. The emphasis on brokenness in mission is much-needed, as is his insistence that there is a missiological *challenge* inherent in the grimness Paul’s apostolic lifestyle. Koyama will be remembered for his ‘theology rooted in the pain of God’, his vision of ‘the crucified mind’, his meditation on ‘the cross without a handle’ and his perception of ‘the finger of God that does not work comprehensively.’ These are certainly powerful and compelling images.

²⁴ Lecture notes, Worcester, UK, April 2001

We now turn to a very different character indeed.

CHAPTER FOUR: SIGNS AND WEAKNESS

The missiology of John Wimber

“Power Evangelism” is a phrase associated with the person and ministry of John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Movement. As I will explain, it is a missiology which grows out of a particular reading of scripture and consists of particular expectations of how God wants to establish his kingdom on earth. Wimber placed a high premium on appreciating the power of God and he longed to see the whole church equipped to minister in this power. The task here is not to attempt a thorough critique of Wimber’s theology, but rather to see if his distinctive approach to mission throws any light back on 2 Corinthians. Broadly speaking, is the vocabulary and ethos of ‘power evangelism’ reconcilable with the spirit of the man who wrote, “When I am weak, I am strong”?

4.1 Influences on John Wimber

Somewhat surprisingly John Wimber ‘discovered’ power evangelism when he was already a lecturer at Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth. In his research there in the mid 1970’s he was struck by the undeniable growth experienced by the Pentecostal church. He was influenced by colleagues like Charles Kraft, C. Peter Wagner and Paul Hiebert, who accepted the miraculous as a genuine factor in mission.

He also had opportunities to talk to many pastors from the developing world who were reporting remarkable instances of signs and wonders and church growth. “I felt compelled to re-examine Scripture, looking more carefully at the relationship between spiritual gifts and evangelism” (Wimber 1985:85). He found there a striking continuity between how Jesus evangelized and how the disciples evangelised. “The disciples went out and spread the good news in the same way as Christ: combining proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God. The apostles not only taught what they heard, they did what Jesus did” (ibid. 88).

The years which followed were characterized by many concrete experiences of God’s graciousness and power, some of which are described in *Power Evangelism* and *Power Healing*. These practical

²⁵ Lecture notes, Worcester, UK, April 2001

experiences filled out his existing knowledge of the principles of church growth, and became the basis for the equally practical (and now infamous) course MC 510, *Signs and Wonders and Church Growth*, which he co-taught with C. Peter Wagner at the Fuller School of World Missions.²⁶ In 1984 the course content was distilled into a book *Power Evangelism*, a lively presentation of the theory and practice of signs and wonders in mission today.

4.2 *John Wimber's Missiology*

Wimber defines power evangelism as “a presentation of the gospel that is rational but that also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel – the clear proclamation of the finished work of Christ on the cross – comes with a demonstration of God’s power through signs and wonders...a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, empowered presentation of the gospel.” (Wimber 1985:78)

4.2.1 Recognising Prejudices

Christian leaders who talk a lot about ‘power’ are often accused of triumphalism or emotionalism, or at least of an ‘over-realised eschatology’. The excesses of the Word of Faith movement, the showmanship of the tele-evangelists, the shallowness of prosperity teaching and the ambiguities inherent in much of charismatic experience have all contributed to a now widespread suspicion of ‘power religion’. Many of us have been programmed to reject that which is manifestly out of our control or which carries with it the potential for disappointment. *Power Evangelism* heralds from California, depicts exploding fireworks on its cover and is written in an upbeat, enthusiastic register by a former jazz musician – it has several strikes against it from the start. An article by M.T. Davies has sought to defend John Wimber against some of the negative connotations which his label “power evangelism” might suggest:

It can suggest the kind of showmanship from which he in fact distanced himself, seeking always normal and low-key styles of speech and behaviour. It can suggest an aggressive edge to outreach, when actually Vineyard churches are often exemplary in welcoming people through a comfortable and friendly environment and through activities reflecting a Christian spirit of service and unqualified interest in others. It can suggest an obsession with the dramatic or permission to claim just any miracle one might fancy. By his own account the ‘signs’ by which individuals are impressed may be events of quite a simple kind but which carry some persuading power of the reality of a personally loving and seeking God. That is why he encouraged Christians to look out for naturally-occurring opportunities to pray with people about their current concerns or difficulties and to expect to see gracious evidences of God’s activity on their behalf. (Davies 1998:232)

4.2.2 Critical Responses

As might have been expected, the first edition of *Power Evangelism* provoked some fierce reactions

²⁶ The course ran for four years, 1982-1986, moving each semester to a larger room. Eventually Fuller stopped the course, naming as their primary objection “the concept of healing clinics in an academic

from evangelicals of a ‘cessasionist’ school, but even those who were broadly sympathetic to John Wimber’s position expressed some concerns about making signs and wonders such a focus of kingdom life. In a revised edition of the book in 1992, he clarified his views:

I do not mean to imply that power evangelism is the only kind of evangelism practised in the New Testament. Nor do I imply that power evangelism has been the most common type practised by Christians throughout church history. For example, evangelicals assert that the proclamation of the gospel message has intrinsic spiritual power, an assertion I would not deny. But my point remains: power evangelism was one of the normal kinds of evangelism in the early Church and has surfaced throughout the history of the Church with remarkable results. (Wimber 1992, p.256n)

In power evangelism we do not add to the gospel, nor do we seek to add power to the gospel. But we do turn to the Third Person of the triune God in our evangelistic efforts, consciously co-operating with his anointing, gifting and leading. (ibid.)

4.2.3 Strengths

One of Wimber’s strengths is his sensible, honest reading of the New Testament, and his willingness to take seriously some of the obvious but oft-overlooked (or ignored) missiological principles which arise out of it. His assessment of Luke-Acts highlights the continuity between the ministry of Jesus and that of the early disciples – and the undeniably power-ful character of both. Wimber’s theology is by no means as glib as some have suggested. Although his exegesis is not always as thorough as it might be²⁷, there is an extraordinary level of agreement between Wimber’s conclusions and those of better-recognized missiologists. Senior and Stuhlmüller’s exhaustive survey of the biblical foundations for mission concludes by identifying four key foundations therein, one of which is “religious experience: catalyst to mission” (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983:329) Michael Green, seeking to explain the impact of the first apostles, discusses their dedication, endurance and compassion, but ends with “one of the most notable characteristics of all: the sheer power of these early missionaries.” (Green 1979:28) “Could it be,” he asks, “that we know so little of evangelism in any powerful way because we know so little of the Spirit?” (ibid. 141)

4.3 *John Wimber and the Corinthians*

Was Wimber’s experience of ‘power evangelism’ anything like the experience of Paul in Corinth? Wimber himself argues vigorously that Paul’s ministry in Corinth was a prime example of power evangelism, indeed that it represents a watershed in Paul’s missiology. He cites Paul’s description of his first visit there, described in 1 Cor.2:3-4. The Corinthians believed the message because it was accompanied by “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”

environment” (Wimber, C. 1999:168)

²⁷ “If you are of a nit-picking disposition, there are theological hostages to fortune on every page.” (Michael Green, foreword to *The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth*, p.xiii)

It is in actual fact debatable whether the ‘demonstration of the Spirit’s power’ in 1 Cor.1 refers to signs and wonders or to the inherent power of the gospel to transform lives.²⁸ Much clearer is the passage in 2 Corinthians 12 already mentioned, where Paul states emphatically that the Corinthian church has no reason to consider itself ‘inferior’ even in terms of its experience of manifest divine power. “The things which mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – *were* done among you with great perseverance.” Although no specific mention is made in Acts 18 of signs and wonders in Corinth, it is clear from even a cursory reading of Acts that power evangelism was a common feature in the ministry of Paul and his contemporaries.²⁹

4.3.1 Differing Emphases

Here then are two incisive questions: Why does Paul mention signs and wonders only once in this epistle, if they were such an integral element of his ministry in Corinth? Conversely, why does Wimber seem to mention them *so much*? Surely there is a discrepancy here? I submit that there are particular reasons why Paul is reticent to ‘unpack’ any further his endorsement of power evangelism in 12:12, and also reasons why John Wimber sometimes seems to have packed very little else.

I stressed in Chapter 2 some of the socio-religious considerations relating to first-century Corinth. The Corinthians *already* appreciated “visible show of divinity at work.” They were used to that from the mystery cults, and indeed many of the new Christians in Corinth were initially attracted to Christ by Paul’s miracles. They knew a Christ who was ‘powerful among them’ (13:3) and their very questioning of Paul’s weaknesses shows that they were thinking within an exclusively power-orientated paradigm. Therefore, anything beyond the reminder that power ‘was not lacking’ in his ministry would be counter-productive for Paul. He needed instead to provide appropriate context for this power (i.e. weaknesses) and the necessary qualifications to its use.

Wimber’s audience is very different. His ministry and his books orbited around his primary concern – ‘the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry’ (Eph.4:11) - and for him this meant not just the Vineyard but the *whole* church, including the mainline denominational churches. The church today, in contrast to first century Corinth, is relatively unused to “visible show of divinity at work”, which is why Wimber made signs and wonders particularly prominent. The emphasis is needed to restore a balance, indeed to counter “one of the most damaging weaknesses in Western Christianity, our deep-seated scepticism about the supernatural.”³⁰ For those who still have doubts about his equilibrium,

²⁸ In fact, probably both aspects are intended.

²⁹ Wimber cites fourteen instances where apostles or non-apostles preached, performed works of power and saw significant church growth as a result. (Wimber 1985:257n)

³⁰ Michael Green, foreward to *The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth*, p.xi

The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth is “a book which reveals the roundness and balance of the man”.³¹ It underlines his commitment to biblical orthodoxy and to what he called the “main and plain” things: growth towards Christian maturity, transformation of character, prayer, humility, forgiveness, social justice – these are his ‘obsessions’ just as much as anything more overtly supernatural.

4.3.2 Wimber and ἀσθενεῖαι

John Wimber may have been reputed for power, but his life was just as notable for its weaknesses. I use the word ‘weaknesses’ in the 2 Corinthians ἀσθενεῖαι sense now, particularly in its dimensions of ill-health and fierce opposition.

Sickness

John was twenty-four years old when doctors diagnosed him with dangerously high blood pressure and they told him he would not live to be twenty-seven. During his life he suffered from atherosclerosis, angina, and cancer – his wife Carol used to comment wryly, “Never has any one man died of so many things at the same time.” (C.Wimber 1999:177) His ministry trips in the late eighties and nineties were characterised by extraordinary physical weakness and hardship, and are movingly described by Carol in *John Wimber: The Way it Was*. The overriding impression from these pages is that John could have written a tribulation-list to rival 2 Corinthians 11. My only personal memory of him reflects this: he led a series of Bible studies at a UK summer conference in 1995³²; he could only speak with the help of a pig-saliva mouth spray, which he would offer around jokingly.

Opposition

Carol Wimber also describes the opposition John encountered from religious leaders, some of it valid and constructive criticism but some of it absurd or vicious – she uses the phrase “constant slandering and unending hatred” (C.Wimber 1999:171). As John’s influence grew, so did the criticism. He wrote a number of *Position Papers* to clarify his views, but refused to enter into debate with his detractors or defend himself against them.³³

4.4 *Summary*

³¹ Michael Green, foreword to *The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth*, p.xi

³² *New Wine*, Shepton Mallett, 1995

³³ see ‘Why I don’t respond to criticism’ in *Equipping the Saints* (2:3 1988, pp.15-16)

John Wimber was a very humble man and resisted any attempt to brand him an ‘apostle’.³⁴ However, in the light of all the above, it is hard not to recognize elements of his own life and ministry which were strikingly ‘apostolic’. He certainly combined proclamation and demonstration of the gospel in the context of extreme personal weaknesses.

I have not discussed in depth the *role* of signs and wonders in holistic mission; that is a task which I leave to others more competent. My aim here has been a retrospective exposition of John Wimber’s missiology in the wider context of his experiences and sufferings. I consider that his life and thought provide us with a modern example of a genuinely *Paul-ine* minister of the gospel, after the model outlined in 2 Corinthians, and as we have seen, that is also a truly *Christ-ian* model. We are now in a position to draw together the different threads of this investigation.

³⁴ Carol Wimber tells of one occasion when she tentatively asked him if he thought he was an apostle. “He answered, ‘Good grief, Carol, Nicholas Ben Gu planted thousands of churches. If there is such a thing as an apostle walking around today it is someone like him!’” (C. Wimber 1999:215) see discussion of this term in chapter 1

CONCLUSIONS

Karl Barth called 2 Corinthians a “long-drawn-out, harrassed groan.”³⁵ It is indeed a groan, but not of despair or self-pity. It is a groan of solidarity with Christ, and it is edged with joy. Paul has realised that a ‘groaning’ lifestyle, a ‘broken’ lifestyle is the proper context for the manifestation of divine power and glory. Divine power does not drive out weakness; on the contrary, it only comes to its full strength in and through weakness. “For the first time in [Paul’s] extant letters, and probably for the first time in the entire philosophical and religious literature of the West, we find the experience of involuntary and innocent suffering invested with positive value and meaning *in itself*” (Harvey 1996:31). Bosch referred to the epistle as “the best case-study in missionary spirituality that has ever been published” (1979:13). It is a case-study pregnant with paradox, not least the portrait of the missionary as a captive led in triumphal procession by God ‘in Christ’.

This paper has introduced Kosuke Koyama and John Wimber as two men who have meditated on and experienced these paradoxes. I am reluctant to judge how fairly the mind behind 2 Corinthians is reflected in the thought of either, or how helpful their examples might be for missionaries across the world today. Neither do I intend to create an artificial synthesis of the two approaches or settle for their lowest common denominator, as this would do violence to the thought of both. Rather, I wish to allow each to remain intact, complementing and questioning the other, to leave them simmering in the pot together - an experiment in ‘spacious missiology’.

There is room in our missiological pot for both Koyama and Wimber, because the God of wonders and the God of waterbuffaloes are one and the same. The God whose ‘strong hand and outstretched arm’ are revealed in the Bible at the same time experiences the pain of being involved with humankind. Jesus healed the sick and calmed the sea but let himself be broken and nailed to a cross. Paul preached, taught and demonstrated the power of the Spirit on countless occasions, but lived his life in hardship, hunger and humiliation. He carried about in his body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might be revealed in him.

³⁵ ([the Epistle to the Romans](#), 258)

We talk a lot nowadays about ‘holistic’ mission, an integrated approach which combines ‘words, works and wonders.’ I believe the reflections in this paper point to a slightly different conception of holistic mission: *words, works and wonders in weakness*. God’s power is at its most powerful in our weakness. Power evangelism is at its most powerful in our brokenness. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Appendix 1: What was Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’?³⁶

σκολοψ can mean “thorn” or “stake”, the former being the more common.

It could refer to Paul’s opponents. In Paul *αγγελος* always refers to a person, and the context 10-13 is basically the opposition Paul is facing from false apostles. 11:14 specifically states that Satan can appear as a ‘messenger’ of light, and in the LXX, the word ‘thorn’ is associated with the enemies of Israel (Num.33:55, Ez.23:24).

The majority of scholars, however, believe σκολοψ refers to a physical ailment. The phrase *τη σαρκη* (‘in the flesh’) would certainly appear to endorse a physical problem. In both OT and NT traditions, Satan is often associated with physical illness (Job 2:5, Luke 13:16). Moreover, the fact that Paul prays for the thorn to be removed, is a very telling argument. “Would the apostle pray to be spared persecution?” (Martin 1986:415). One possibility is that Paul had ophthalmia or a similar eye problem (Gal.4:15, 6:11), maybe resulting from his Damascus road experience. Another option is a form of malaria, which would be recurrent and feel truly like a ‘battering’.

Marshall identified the thorn as “a socially debilitating disease or disfigurement which was made the subject of ridicule and invidious comparison” (Martin 1986:416) – this would be humiliating but not incapacitating. Physical *ασθενεια* of some kind, particularly I believe of the kind suggested by Marshall, fits very well with what we know of the charges of Paul’s detractors - How could such a weakened man be the bearer of a message of power, the ambassador of the Risen One? It fits with Paul’s evident humiliation – after his visions this thorn brought him heavily down to earth, preventing him from becoming proud. It fits with Christ’s offer of grace to enable Paul to cope with the thorn and Paul’s subsequent choice to delight in his infirmity.

³⁶ This survey of the possibilities draws predominantly from Martin 1986 (412-416) and also from Harvey and Barnett.

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