

POWER IN RELATIONSHIPS

Issues of Love and Control

Study Two

GOD AND POWER

POWER DIFFERENTIAL

In the previous study we looked at what has been called the ‘power imbalance’ present in many relationships. ‘Imbalance’ suggests something out of kilter that needs to be corrected, presumably by seeking to restore a more even balance. We have said that, in a situation where a person has been disempowered by another, it is helpful for that person to come to see and exercise the power they have, and to be affirmed and protected in that. Some seek to correct every inequality of power in relationships by corrective action intended to establish equality compulsorily. But we have also recognised that a difference of power levels is inherent in the nature of many relationships. Men tend to be physically stronger than women.¹ Adults will always be bigger and stronger and more experienced than young children.² Teachers and elders exercise a moral authority over those whom they teach or supervise.³ Employers and managers will, by nature of the case, have more responsibility and decision-making power than employees, who may be glad for that to be so.⁴ Rather than denying the inherent inequality of power in these situations, it may be better to take this into account and allow for it by moderating our behaviour accordingly. Rather than calling it a ‘power imbalance’, it may be better simply and neutrally to refer to it as a ‘power differential’.

Given, then, the power differential that is present between human persons, what is the power differential between God and creatures? How does God conduct Himself in that? Does God ‘moderate’ His behaviour accordingly, to make allowance for that? If so, how does He go about it? Are these appropriate questions to ask, or does God operate according to a different framework altogether?

¹ As testified to in separate sporting competitions for women and men.

² It would be interesting to know whether this explains the prevalence of giants in many traditional children’s stories. Such that the story of ‘Jack the Giant-killer’, for instance, might relate in some mythic way to children trying to make their way in a world dominated by adults.

³ Hence the need, cited in the previous study, for appropriate codes of conduct and pastoral guidelines.

⁴ This is not to deny the necessity for checks and balances in industrial relations to guard against exploitation and ensure fairness.

POWER BELONGS TO GOD⁵

The Scriptures are replete with attributions of power to God:

Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all
according to their work (Ps. 62:11).

It is interesting to note that God's 'power' here is matched by His 'steadfast love'. The parallelism of Hebrew poetry may even indicate that these two are one and the same thing. It is exercised here in the payment of just reward and retribution, and all are accountable to Him.

The power God has belongs to Him as the One who has created all things:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created (Rev. 4:11).

Thus David extolled the extent of God's power in all things:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name . . . For all things come from you (1 Chron. 29:10–14).

The Son of God shares fully in this power, as 'He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (Heb. 1:3). God's power is exercised particularly by God's action in Christ to save humanity and bring creation to its intended goal:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12).

Christ in this saving action is himself 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24). Christ 'was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Cor. 13:4). It is by virtue of this victory, and the judgements that come with it, that it is said of God:

⁵ There are a number of NCPI publications that deal with this issue. Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Weakness of Man and the Power of God* (Christian Teaching Series No. 1, 1974) is a small and thorough coverage. It teaches about the powerlessness of human beings of themselves, and the incredible abundance of strength and power we have from God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Deane Meatheringham's short study, *The Weakness of God and the Power of Man* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1981), shows how God, in what appears to the world to be His 'weakness', has overcome the prideful 'power' of sinful human beings, and how it is in our weakness that God's living power is revealed. Geoffrey Bingham's small book, *The Authority and Submission of Love* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1982), leaves the reader with the upending conviction that true authority and love are the same thing. Ian D. Pennicook, *Power in the Church* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1997), says that the power we have is the proclamation of the gospel, not as 'the mere imparting of information' but as that spoken in 'the wonder of the unity of the preachers with the one whom they proclaim' (p. 62), who Himself in that word transforms the hearers, as He has already transformed the proclaimer.

you have taken your great power
and begun to reign (Rev. 11:17).

This power is conveyed in the announcement of this saving action. The gospel is itself ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (Rom. 1:16). Paul also calls it ‘the message about [of] the cross’, of which he says:

to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).

This is brought through ‘by the power of the Spirit of God’ (Rom. 15:19), when it is testified to by those who have received ‘power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’ (Acts 1:8), and who speak it ‘not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction’ (1 Thess. 1:5).

The references to innate human weakness or powerlessness apart from God (as in Rom. 5:6: ‘while we were still weak’), such that ‘All flesh is grass’ (Isa. 40:6, RSV), highlight the reality that ‘power belongs to God’, and that any power exercised by human beings is God’s, and derives from God.⁶ Here, then, is a vast ‘power differential’, if we are going to see it in those terms. How does God conduct Himself in that? The Scriptures make clear that God exercises His power for the good of His creation:

Whilst we may see this power as awesome, it is also very gentle and tender. God is as concerned with a sparrow falling as He is with the might of a mountain. He knows every hair of a man’s head. Also His power is personal. Ephesians 1:20 tells us that God’s power works towards us. Ephesians 3:20 and Philippians 2:13 tells us that God’s power is working, or energizing within us. Romans 1:20 tells us that the whole creation beats out the message of God’s invisible nature. The visible things let us know God’s eternal power and deity. So Psalm 19:1 says that the heavens declare the glory of God.

There is another use of His power, which at first seems grim and even fierce. It is God’s implacable opposition to evil, and His determination to destroy it utterly and obliterate it from His universe. This may seem to be a negative use of power, but it works for a positive end—the entire renewal of all things which He has created . . . God, using His power to create, uses it also to sustain and renew, and bring to perfection that which He has created.⁷

This is well expressed in ‘the last words of David’ where, by revelation from God, the true exercise of human power is modelled on that which has been experienced from God:

The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.

Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?
But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;
to touch them one uses an iron bar
or the shaft of a spear.

And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot (2 Sam. 23:3–7).

⁶ Compare the related notion, ‘there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God’ (Rom. 13:1)—whether they exercise it poorly or well.

⁷ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Weakness of Man and the Power of God*, pp. 1–2.

The true exercise of power—the way God goes about it, and the way those who know and fear God go about it—benefits those towards whom it is exercised, like the sun coming up in the morning, and like the rain on the grass (compare Matt. 5:45). It also clears out whatever is evil, without compromising with it or being tainted by it.

LET US BREAK THEIR CHAINS, AND THROW OFF THEIR FETTERS

This positive view of God's power and its exercise has been deliberately misinterpreted and misconstrued by human beings in their sin. Humanity's catch-cry is now that of the rulers and peoples of the earth who have set themselves against God and His Messiah:

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
'Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us' (Ps. 2:1–3).

We now tend to view and misrepresent God through the distorted lens of our sin-determined experience and our own misuse of power. We see God's power over us as oppressive, even abusive, and as that which can and must be shaken off.⁸

This is particularly so when God is spoken of in connection with judgement. For some it has become commonplace to deride any notion of a God who brings suffering or judgement to bear. This is even characterised as the promotion and perpetuation of power abuse in relationships. Some who have experienced abusive human relationships are not willing to contemplate a relationship with God—especially not as Father—on the basis of this misunderstanding.

Those of this opinion who wish to retain some belief in God find themselves obliged to recast their understanding of God to exclude any participation on God's part in the bringing of suffering and judgement. This necessarily discounts vast swathes of both the Old and New Testaments. Some settle for a God who empathises and suffers with us, but who cannot be held responsible for anything untoward that happens to us. P. T. Forsyth observes tellingly:

. . . a God who is merely or mainly sympathetic is not the Christian God . . . a sympathy which has no help in it mocks us with an enlargement of our own sensitive impotence, which means so much better than it can . . . We must have a sympathy that can not only help but save, save to the uttermost, save for ever, and not only bless but redeem. Nay, far more, we must have, for the entire confidence of faith, a sympathy that *has* redeemed, and already triumphs in a conclusive salvation . . . Even a loving God is really God not because He loves, but because He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace.⁹

⁸ As in the song:

God's O.K.
'Cos He's my mate,
But there's one thing
That I hate:
There's gonna be
One hell of a fuss
If he thinks He's any better
Than one of us.

(*New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 283).

⁹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood (1910), 1984 pp. 58–60.

Isaiah had no doubts about God's entire responsibility for both judgement and blessing:

I am the LORD and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things (Isa. 45:6–7).

It is because God is in charge of both that he can be legitimately prayed to with regard to each, if the people would have it so:

The people did not turn to him who struck them,
or seek the LORD of hosts (Isa. 9:13).

A COSMIC CHILD ABUSER?

In particular, the understanding that God gave his Son up to suffering and death on the cross is characterised as abusive, and as promoting and justifying abuse. One prominent example of this is in the writings of Steve Chalke,¹⁰ Christian leader and social activist based in the UK.¹¹ Chalke caricatures this understanding of the cross as 'a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed', and dismisses it as a 'twisted version of events' which is 'morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith'.¹² If any are presenting the action of the cross in that gross way, then let them take stock. But we may also be up against some who will seek to distort a legitimate biblical understanding of the action of the cross, as a way of not facing it, to avoid being confronted by it, or to pursue some other agenda.¹³

Some who take exception to the notion that God 'did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us' (Rom. 8:32)—that is, to death on the cross¹⁴—are so forceful in their objections, that we may be tempted to soft-pedal our own adherence to it. Such statements as: 'Can anyone imagine a more obsessional phantasm . . . than that of a God who demands the torturing of his own son to death as satisfaction for his anger?'¹⁵ and 'a process in which one

¹⁰ Information in this paragraph and footnote 11 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Chalke>, and <<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2005/05/is-atonement-child-abuse.html>>, accessed 26th November 2007.

¹¹ An ordained Baptist minister, Steve Chalke has been active for over twenty years in delivering housing, education, training, youthwork, and healthcare in countries around the world, and in 2004 was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his services to social inclusion. He is also the Chair of Stop The Traffik, a global coalition of over 700 charities in 60 countries that is working to stop the buying and selling of people, and is the official holder of the Guinness World Record for the largest amount of sponsorship money ever raised by an individual through a single event, running the London Marathon, as well as becoming the fastest money-generating sportsman in history, by raising over £1,855 million in 3 hours 58 minutes 40 seconds. One hesitates to take exception to something said by one with such a record. Nevertheless, each of us, whoever we are, is responsible for what we say, and can be held accountable for it.

¹² Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003), p. 182, cited in D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 185. Such a statement has provoked debate and division within evangelical Christianity, with such respected persons as John Piper, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, and N. T. Wright weighing in to the fray. We are happy to leave them to it, and do not wish to get onto the bandwagon with them, but simply to note that it is in the air.

¹³ J. I. Packer, perhaps rightly, calls it a 'supremely silly . . . smartypants notion' (*Penal Substitution Revisited*, <<http://www.reformation21.org>>). Even so, that this notion is increasingly held by numbers of serious-minded persons means that it is not going to go away easily.

¹⁴ The word for 'gave . . . up', *παρέδωκεν* *paradōken*, is the same word used by Paul in Rom 1:24, 26, 28 for the giving up of sinners to the outworking of what is in their hearts, in the action of God's wrath. It is also the word used for Judas' betrayal of Jesus in e.g. Luke 22:6. Compare Acts 2:23.

¹⁵ Antoine Vergote, cited in Headley Beare's précis of 'Bringing Jesus out of Captivity', Chapter 1 of Diarmid O'Murchu, *Catching up with Jesus*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Co. 2005, in *Common Theology*, Volume 2, number 6, Winter 2007, p. 11.

member of the community of God masochistically endures the excruciating pain that another member of the community of God sadistically inflicts on him'¹⁶—these can give us pause and make us consider whether our presentation of the action of the cross gives the lie to them, or plays into their hands.

Is there a way to think about this biblically and responsibly? How might we rightly present the action of the cross of Christ in a way that truly testifies to the love of God?—as in the first letter of John:

God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8–10).

To receive that rightly will enable us to operate rightly in our relationships with each other:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11).

THE RELATIONAL CREATOR

Terence Fretheim¹⁷ has drawn attention to elements in the text of Genesis 1 and 2 that depict God, not as a lone, unilateral, all-powerful, independent Deity in absolute control, but rather as a God who keeps company, is intentionally interdependent with what He makes, and shares power with the non-human creation and the human creatures in such a way that they participate with Him in the creative activity, as He comes to work from within the world, rather than upon the world from the outside.

When God said, 'Let the *earth* put forth vegetation' (Gen. 1:11), 'Let the *waters* bring forth swarms of living creatures' (Gen. 1:20), and 'Let the *earth* bring forth living creatures of every kind' (Gen. 1:24), He was not just creating by divine fiat—He was calling upon already-existing creatures to participate in the creative process as material for creating other creatures. Similarly, the 'vegetation' was 'plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it' (Gen. 1:12)—containing within themselves the means for ongoing creation. So also God spoke directly with His blessing to the sea creatures and the birds: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth' (Gen. 1:22).

When it comes to the human creation, the 'Let *us* make . . . in *our* image, according to *our* likeness' (Gen. 1:26), generally taken now to be a reference to the divine council,¹⁸ indicates that God is not alone in the making of human beings, but is inviting the others to participate with Him in it, through conversation, dialogue and interaction.¹⁹ The man and the woman are also invited to participate in the ongoing creative process by being fruitful and multiplying, filling, subduing (as God Himself did with the 'formless void and darkness' of Genesis 1:2),

¹⁶ D. Soelle, *Suffering*, (Philadelphia Fortress:1988) p. 27, cited in Dave Andrews, 'The Crux of the Struggle—The Place of the Cross in the Process of Transformation', *Zadok Paper S114A*, Winter 2001, p. 1. Dave Andrews, his wife Ange, and their family, have lived and worked in intentional communities with marginalised and disadvantaged groups of people in Asia and Australia for the last thirty years.

¹⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota, in 'God created the world good, not perfect', a Public Lecture at the Adelaide College of Divinity Campus, Brooklyn Park SA, 20th November 2007.

¹⁸ Is not the translation of Isa. 6:3 as 'God of power and might', used in some modern liturgies—which characterises God as Almighty—a sad declension from the literal translation 'LORD of hosts', where God is characterised by the company He keeps?

¹⁹ Gen. 1:27 and 9:6, however, speak only of the 'image of God', suggesting that 1:26 indicates a plurality within God, which has given rise among Christians to a Trinitarian interpretation.

and having dominion. The sabbath rest of God has a sense of letting the creatures be what they have been created to be, with a bit of breathing space, in mutual appreciation and interdependence. In Genesis 2, it would appear that God has come down, in a massive act of divine self-limitation, apparently in human-like form, to get ‘dirt under the divine fingernails’ in the messy business of forming the man and breathing directly into him ‘the breath of life’, planting a garden, and getting trees to grow out of the ground. God is remarkably free in bringing each creature to the man, getting the man to name them, and abiding by the man’s decision. The man’s disinclination to be content to settle for any of the animals as ‘a helper fit for him’ prompts God to again become involved directly in the messy hands-on surgery that brought forth the woman.

All of this depicts a God not authoritarian and removed, but directly engaged in the risky, disorderly, even suffering processes of ongoing creation, drawing both human and non-human elements into participation with Him in the creative action—a God almost prone, if we can put it this way, to incarnation! And if we are made in the image of *this* God, then we will be along these lines also.

MUTUAL INDWELLING

We saw in the last study that underlying much of our thinking is a preferred sense of being separate, independent, and over against one another as persons, each with our own independent patch of ground on which we stand, from which we attempt to relate with one another, often in a somewhat prickly fashion. This is especially true when we feel under an obligation to others that we want to somehow pay off so we can be free of it. We saw that Jesus broke through that with something far richer, more generous, and of a much larger—eternal—dimension. Jesus came with God’s love—the love that is in God, the love that is from God to us.

The sinful independent perspective was no part of Jesus’ experience or teaching. No way could Jesus ever contemplate any separateness or over-against-ness between himself and the Father. The reality for Jesus was always:

I am in the Father and the Father is in me (John 14:10, 11).

The notion of being ‘in’ another person may seem strange to us, who make a practice of separateness. But do we not get a taste of it in, say, a marriage, or a close friendship? Where one person is so much inside the other person’s mind and heart that they know what the other person is thinking and feeling, and what the other person is going to say before they say it? That is something of the order of the oneness in relationship that is between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, that Jesus brought into the human environment, for us to experience with him.

This is the love that Jesus knew, and wanted us to know with him. He spoke of a time when we would experience this:

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (John 14:20).

The love-union between the Father and the Son covered and filled the whole of life:

The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:35).

The Father holds nothing back of Himself, in His giving to the Son. The Son knows and lives in that love, and loves the Father in the flow of this:

The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:20).

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19).

Everything the Son says and does is nothing other than what the Father says and does, that the Father showers him with, in their closeness with each other:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me (John 14:10–11).

Making room, giving full hospitality to—this is the meaning of the word *perichoresis*, which the church fathers used to describe this divine mutual indwelling. No less is the Spirit involved:

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:34–35).

Jesus was praying that this love would be known by those who believe in him:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:21, 26).

GOD'S LOVE IN THE CROSS

When was Jesus praying that? Just before he went to the cross to give his life. He had said that when this happened, then we would see and know the love of the Father and the Son:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me (John 8:28).

In the action of the cross is focussed all the love of the Father for the Son:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

Freely, without obligation, in obedience. Here also is where we find the love of the Son for the Father:

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (John 14:31).

Why does the Son love the Father in the action of the cross? Because he sees the Father doing what He has always been doing—giving Himself, holding nothing back, as he has always been towards His creation (as in 2 Sam. 23:1–7)—but doing it now in a way that has never been done before, giving His all in His Son, so that there was nothing more that He could give: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us' (Rom. 8:32).

Why does the Father love the Son as he lays down his life on the cross? Because the Father sees the Son doing what has always been in the Father's heart—giving *his* all, holding nothing back, until there was nothing more that he could give, in the action with the Father of the Father's love for us.

How is this love for us? Well:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16–17).

Here we were, condemned and perishing, and here was God, giving His Son to that condemnation and death, so that we might live. What would have happened if he had not done that? We would still be stuck in all our sin, and end up in hell. What if God had said: ‘I love My Son more than I love you lot, so I will save him from death, and you lot can go on to hell’? He didn’t say that. So what was he saying? In giving My Son up to that for you—I love you no less than I love My Son!

This was the love that Jesus prayed we would know and be in, as he went to the cross:

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24–26).

This love-union, this mutual indwelling, this total self-giving, leaves no room for any separateness or over-against-ness, and dispels any notion that the Father was doing anything untoward with regard to the Son, or the Son was doing anything inappropriate with regard to the Father.

POWER AND LOVE

This love, displayed and communicated on the cross, is the true love, and the true power. This is the love that we are now in, if we belong to Christ through faith. We are still to be mindful of temptations to pride, and to make due provision against it:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned (Rom. 12:3).

We are also to resist the tendency, that our flesh is still prone to, of seeking to control others:

Do not lord it over those in your charge (1 Pet. 5:3).

To live in this love of Christ is the willing abandonment of power-play:

Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:42–45).

LOVE’S RISK

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was [literally *being*] in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness (Phil. 2:3–7).

When Jesus was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’, when from his eternity as God he submitted himself to miniscule and entirely vulnerable processes of human conception, consented to be a naked child coming out from between his mother’s legs, that was no come-down, no great condescension, that was fully expressive of God’s own self-emptying and self-giving.

When God created the world, the universe, it was a great risk. He could have just stayed as God—and that would have been fine—rather than going to all this trouble, and the possibility that it could all go badly wrong. But that is not the way God is: God poured Himself out in the action of creation, so that it would not be just God and that’s all, hanging on to all that God has and is and keeping it to Himself. God made it so that there is God and others—pouring out Himself from Himself into others at God’s own expense.

We hold back from that kind of risk, and to that extent we are not Godlike. God continues every day to pour Himself out for His creation: remember David’s great revelation as to how God rules His universe: like the sun coming up in the morning and like the rain on the grass—not by exploiting it but by serving it for its good—and ridding His creation of evil like taking a crowbar to a heap of thorns and bundling them into the fire (1 Sam. 23:1–7).

P. T. Forsyth said that the coming of the Son of God in human flesh was not contrary to God’s Almightyness, but the ultimate expression of it. If God could not enter into humanity in that way, His power would be fatally limited ‘to all that is outside human nature’. ‘The power to limit Himself into man is an essential part of His infinite power.’²⁰ Because he was in the form of God, as the very expression of being in the form of God, that is what the Son of God did. He was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’. It was a true act of God.

Self-emptying is one thing, self-humbling is another. The Son of God did not humble himself to be born in human likeness. Human beings are in the image of God! God’s own offspring! So it is no come-down, no humiliation, for the Son of God to enter humanity—it is of a piece with it. But Paul then goes on to say:

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross (Phil 2:7–8).

The humbling is the ultimate extension of the self-emptying—going all the way with it. When God puts Himself at risk by creating something other than Himself, and that other-than-God, contrary to the way God is in Himself, rather than pouring itself out in the way God’s love operates, instead sets itself up to grasp to itself and exploit all that is, as we have done, then God, if He is going to see it all through in the way He intended it to be, consistent with Himself, will go on in the way of humbling Himself: exposing Himself to the evil, entering in to the pain and guilt and shame, not holding back. To be a naked baby is one thing, which is innocent enough, but to be stripped naked as an adult man, and hung up in public view on a cross—that is humiliation. And it took all the resources of the eternal Spirit of God to carry that through to the end in the way that gave that full expression of God as He is.

²⁰ P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, NCPI, Blackwood 1987 (1957), p. 33.

This love is true power:

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:9–13).

LOVE'S WORD

Word into darkness
(Spirit holding)
life unfolding
taming chaos
naming me
Silence broken
—One has spoken—
Love's risk.

Word in outer darkness
hung
unsung
wearing sin
bearing—me
Through the paining
Spirit straining—
Love's separation.

Word returning to the Father
glory taking
making sons
waking singing
bringing me!
Spirit filling
all things thrilling—
LOVE'S ACHIEVEMENT.