

“Power and Authority”

Reading: Acts 1:1-11; 2:1-4, 14-21

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

I say this with some fear and trembling since I am *not* an authority on children — I have no children and know very little about them — but my understanding is that there is often a point somewhere around two years old where many children begin to express their individuality in some very forceful ways. I don't pretend to know all the psychological developments taking place in a two-year-old's brain, but I assume that the temper tantrums we sometimes see come from an emerging sense of self and a realization that the world is not always as we would want it to be. We've all witnessed the occasional temper tantrum in the grocery store aisle with a child in meltdown and an exasperated parent just trying to get the shopping done. Like I said, I know nothing of such things; I *never* participated in them as a child. Some parents finally give in to the screaming and buy the child a cookie; others tough it out to teach them a lesson. It's sometimes an epic battle of wills played out right there between the cabbages and bell peppers, an ideological struggle greater even than anything the President and Congress have faced (though I'll leave it up to you to decide which is the child and which is the parent in that analogy).

It's a familiar scenario that illustrates for us the difference between *power* and *authority*. The child throwing the temper tantrum has power, to be sure: screaming and stomping and flailing are very effective at making a scene, no matter how small the child is. The child has the power to make their parents miserable, to draw attention to themselves, to voice their opinions at the top of their little lungs. But power is not the same thing as authority. The child has no authority. Their power is not recognized as legitimate. They may have the power to scream that they want a cookie, but they do not have the *right* to make the decision about whether they get a cookie or not. The parents have the authority; they have the right to decide and determine and control. So as unpleasant as it may be to listen to, I have to respect the parent who tolerates the temper tantrum in the name of refusing to give the child the authority to decide. That's not intended to criticize the occasional cookie granted to preserve the peace; as I said, I have no children and would not dare to give parenting advice. No angry letters one way or the other, please.

Power and authority are two different things. You have a certain measure of power if, for example, you have a handgun, but then we recognize that there are laws governing when and where and how you have authority to use it. And then on top of that, we recognize a different type of authority for police officers and soldiers when they use their weapons. Or another example: you can own a car and that gives you a certain amount of power, but then you need a driver's license and car insurance giving you the authority to use that power.

It's an important distinction to make, and it's something that underlies Jesus' last words in the book of Acts before He ascends to be with His Father. Usually when I've heard preaching on this passage I've heard the emphasis placed on the last part of what He says: that His followers will be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That's a handy summary of the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts, and it's a helpful analogy for how we today should also impact our local area, our region, and our world for Christ. But the part about being witnesses is the second part of what He says, and the two parts are connected.

He tells them to wait for the gift they've been promised from God, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. His followers hear this and respond by asking, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They hear Jesus promising the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and they connect this with the Scriptures they've read that mention the arrival of the Spirit with the completion of God's work, and so they make the conclusion that now God is going to make His people Israel greater than all other nations with Jesus as its leader, and, logically, Jesus' followers in positions of authority as well. Jesus clues us in to their intent by His response: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority." So He's giving them a little bit of a check on their ambition: "Remember, disciples, that it is the Father who has the authority, not you. Don't misunderstand what comes next." And the next word is very important: *but*. It means the next thought is connected to but contrasting with the one that went before it. "*But* you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." The Father has the authority, which, if we remember from our Gospels, He has granted to Jesus the Son, and out of His authority, then, is flowing the gift of power from the Holy Spirit.

Many if not most of the struggles and conflicts we see taking place, whether they're in the grocery aisle or on the world stage, have to do with people disagreeing over who has power and who has authority. Often someone will have some sort of power but lack authority: some rebels might have lots of guns out in the wilderness and can cause all sorts of trouble, but they aren't recognized as a legitimate authority. Or someone will have authority but lack (or feel like they lack) power: a government might feel threatened by a minority group that they think is getting too powerful. If you remember some of the previous chapters in our story, you'll remember that there were often questions about where Jesus' authority came from. He had power, to be sure, but did He have authority to heal on the Sabbath and forgive sins? Where was His authority from? The devil? When He spoke and preached, people were amazed because He spoke as one with authority, and the people in charge were threatened because they weren't ready to share their authority.

But in the kingdom of God there is no question of who has the ultimate authority: it is entirely God's; He alone has the right to authority, though many others have tried to usurp it through the ages. As we read last week, Matthew's gospel ends similarly to what we've read in Acts today: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus said. Again, no question of where the authority rests. And again, a logical consequence of that authority: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." So God has the right to decide, the authority to use power and bestow it as He sees fit and determine how that power will be used properly, and through the work of Jesus He is reclaiming the authority over creation that is rightly His, and now we are seeing how He uses that authority.

To those who acknowledge His authority, God grants power, the ability to do His will, in the person of the Holy Spirit. Part of the problem all through our story has been that even when people before Christ wanted to acknowledge God's authority, they lacked the ability to truly do His will. So now He is imparting Himself to them to empower them to do what He in His rightful authority wants of them. So the next question, then, is what Jesus' followers are empowered to do. If you're hoping for authority, it's not necessarily a disappointment if you get lots of impressive power instead. But what is this power intended for?

Both Matthew and Acts agree: Jesus' authority leads to the empowering of His followers to be messengers of the gospel. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." This is what we are created for. This is what the story of God redeeming humanity has brought us to. This is the charter command of God's kingdom. We are to receive power in the person of God the Holy Spirit baptizing us, soaking us, indwelling us so that we can be faithful witnesses of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Again and again and again in the story of Acts, the pattern in the early church is that people first accept the authority of Jesus and then quickly receive an abundant filling of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Spirit comes into a person from the moment they receive Christ and He seals them as His own, but we also look forward to future fillings and empowerings and giftings of the Spirit as we grow. We are called to mission as witnesses, and we need His power to do it.

We see this power on display throughout the story of the early church as told in the book of Acts. Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit as much as the gospels are the story of Jesus. We see repeated showdowns between the power of the Spirit proclaiming the authority of Jesus and the authority of worldly powers insisting on maintaining their own control. Peter and John heal a beggar in Jesus' name, calling on the authority of Jesus, and they are dragged before the ruling council and threatened. They're repeatedly imprisoned, Stephen is stoned to death, Saul hunts them down and scatters them, because other authorities don't want to recognize Jesus' authority. Christians through the ages have refused to fight in wars, or have refused to participate in injustice, or have loved those whom their state names enemies, or have refused to bow down before state-sponsored gods, because those Christians live under the authority of Jesus before they live under the authority of a state. And so our brothers and sisters have been labeled seditious or traitors or suspects or unpatriotic.

It comes down to power and authority. We are empowered in the Spirit to proclaim the authority of Christ. We do this in a variety of ways; our forefathers and foremothers in the early church show us many options. Sometimes we display power: many times there are miraculous healings performed by the Spirit through the church. These miraculous signs are demonstrations of the power of God dwelling in us and witnessing for Christ. So when we display the power of God, we are witnessing for Christ: when we show encouragement in the midst of despair, or faithfulness in the midst of persecution, or healing in the midst of sickness, or boldness in the midst of fear, or insight in the midst of confusion, or peace in the midst of war, or love in the midst of enemies, in the name of Christ, we are enacting the power of God's Spirit at work in us. So we witness through acts of power.

We also witness by proclaiming the authority of Jesus. When worldly authorities get too big for their britches, we remind them of where our loyalty lies. When the poor are trampled by the rich, or the vulnerable are ignored, or authorities try to divide our loyalties, or others try to convince us to hate our enemies or place ourselves first or pretend sin is not sin, the Spirit moves us to proclaim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the people in our world, even the leaders, sometimes, become that two-year-old in the grocery store aisle, trying to express their power by throwing a tantrum, and it is up to us to insist on the authority of Christ instead. Sometimes it is us who are the two-year-olds who throw a tantrum and assert our own authority in the face of God's, wanting to do it our own way instead of

His, and in those moments we also need to hear the voice of the Spirit saying that Christ has all authority.

And so we are called today to submit our own authority to His, to place ourselves before Him and commit ourselves to being His witnesses because He is Lord, to invite the Holy Spirit again to fill us to bursting with His power to do His will. The Spirit is not always predictable in how He will lead us, but we know that He is good. Paul tells us later in our story that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. If we can give up our own notions of authority and receive *that* in return as we proclaim the rightful Lordship of Christ, isn't that something worth desiring? Let us ask the Holy Spirit to come and do a new act of filling us:

O Holy Spirit, Love of God, infuse your grace,
and descend plentifully into my heart.
Enlighten the dark corners of this neglected dwelling,
and scatter there your cheerful beams;
Dwell in that soul that longs to be your temple;
water that barren soil, over-run with weeds and briars,
and lost for want of cultivating,
and make it fruitful with your dew from heaven.

O Come, as the refreshment of those that languish and faint.
Come, and like a star,
guide those that sail the tempestuous sea of the world.
You are the only haven of the tossed and shipwrecked.
Come glory and crown of the living,
only safeguard of the dying.
Come, Holy Spirit, in much mercy,
and make us fit to receive you. Amen.

-Augustine of Hippo



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