

Crisis in the Church: Insufficient Power

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Bible Text: Matthew 17:14-21

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The miracle in Matthew 17 pictures the condition of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today. The boy illustrates the world. The disciples depict the Church.

As the record in Matthew reveals, the disciples could not cast out the demon from the boy. Whatever they tried did not work.

In like manner, the Church stands helpless in Her attempts to affect the world. The Church presents an ineffective influence upon it. She has failed.

Evidence of Her failure abounds. I will cite only four clear areas of Her insufficiency:

1. the defection from the Church;
2. the disavowal of cardinal doctrines;
3. Her difference from the New Testament Church;
4. Her discord with the commands of Jesus Christ.

The disciples failed because of their unbelief. True, they did not totally lack all faith. They had little faith.

Yet Jesus included them in His admonition recorded in Matthew 17:17:

“Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.”

Jesus saw the true condition of the entire crowd, faithless and perverse.⁽¹⁾ They lacked faith, showing themselves unresponsive to the evidences of Jesus Christ.

They rebelled against the truth of Jesus, each in their own manner.

1. The scribes showed willful and persistent unbelief, because they continually sought a sign from Jesus Christ.
2. The father revealed unwilling unbelief; he cried for help with his doubts.
3. The boy exhibited irresponsible unbelief.
4. The disciples, who had rejected Jesus' teachings on the cross, exposed their unconscious unbelief.

Regardless of the degree or kind of unbelief, it still produces consequences. Unbelief lies at the root of all sin and spiritual failure.

1. It blinds the eyes to the truth and to one's real condition. Blinded eyes lead to ignorance of the enemy, too.
2. It causes dependence upon human effort by giving place to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Thus, it relies upon prior successes as the basis for current efforts.
3. In the end, it prevents the intervention and expression of God's supernatural power. It fails to apply the indwelling power of Christ by the Holy Spirit to present circumstances.

As a result, the disciples' efforts disclosed three fallacies:

1. an inaccurate diagnosis of the boy's problem;
2. an incorrect solution to the problem;
3. insufficient power to solve the problem.

In like manner, the Church today fails for the same reason they failed, unbelief. In addition, the Church today exhibits the same fallacies that the disciples' actions showed.

These conclusions reveal the desperate need of the Church, spiritual revival. She can continue in Her present downhill course, or She can correct Her direction by seeking spiritual reformation and revival.

This passage in Matthew 17:14-21 outlines the immediate steps that the Church must take to reverse Her current condition. From this passage, I want to examine some particular absolute truths about the disciples' insufficient power to cast out the demon from the boy.

From them, I will show how they apply to the Church of Jesus Christ and your life today.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify for you the truth, convict you of its need in your life, and correct you to bring a spiritual revival to you and revolutionize and transform your life.

The boy's cure

Although the disciples attempted to cure the boy, they could not. They failed. The boy remained in his sick condition.

This circumstance differed from their earlier successes. Here their attempts revealed insufficient power to overcome the demon in the boy.

In sharp contrast, the Scriptures show the power of Christ. It says in Matthew 17:18:

“And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.”

This simple setting reveals great truths about Jesus Christ. Space does not permit a complete explanation of them, but here is a partial list of them.

1. It proves His deity; He performs the works of God.
2. It confirms His omnipotence; His power surpasses the greatest that the evil one can muster.
3. It discloses His nature: loving, gracious, and merciful.
4. It demonstrates His authority: total, sovereign, and complete.
5. It shows the responsibility of mankind to glorify God. They wondered and marveled at the mighty power of God in Christ. See Luke’s description of these events in Luke 9.43.

Jesus simply spoke the word and the demon departed. The limitless power of Christ overpowered the limited power of the evil one. With only a rebuke, Jesus restored the boy and relieved his affliction.

The Church’s condition

This incident exposes mankind’s condition before God, too. On the one hand, it shows the glaring unbelief of all the participants in this event.

It also demonstrates their complete helplessness in and of themselves. None of them could help the infirmed boy, including the disciples ⁽²⁾.

Like those early disciples, unbelief characterizes the Church today. Thus, we, too, stand helplessly in the face of our circumstances.

The Church, including you and me, lacks sufficient power to overcome the interference, influence, intimidation, and interruptions of the evil one in the world. Abundant evidence confirms it.

The rise of mechanisms for conservation and defense, used by believers and the Church to preserve spiritual gains, reveals a disturbing lack of the power of Christ ⁽³⁾. These schemes embrace a variety of forms and expressions.

The following list records some, but certainly not all of them:

1. a confidence in methods and means, even Biblical ones;
2. a reliance upon organization and structure; a smooth running, well organized church does not guarantee God’s revealed presence; it may, in fact, prove the opposite;
3. a dependency upon programs, productions, and personalities;

4. a trust in the ways of the world and the flesh: goals; slogans; organization; reputation; influence; money; promotion; popularity; and distortion; for example, this category and the previous one rely upon the vain imaginings of men rather than in the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit;
5. an emphasis upon false solutions: knowledge; science; understanding; apologetics; philosophy; and psychology; in recent years, the Church has tended to adopt these solutions, attempting to defend God, Who needs no defense; the best defense is an overpowering offense.

At best, the Church fits the description in Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:5:

“...Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof...”

Before the Church and individual Christians can ever experience the overwhelming power of Christ in revival, they must first become aware and convinced of their true condition and need ⁽⁴⁾.

The flesh strongly resists the evidences of spiritual failure. For example, pride blossoms and points to apparent “successes.” Further, self-righteousness boasts: “We’re OK; I’m OK. We only need a little improvement in a few areas.”

It is to this condition that the Scriptures speak a rebuke in Psalms 34:18

“The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.”

God gives His grace, not to the self-glorifying, but to the humble. (James 4.6) We, the Church, you, and I, must recognize and admit our weakness and helplessness. We are spiritually impotent.

At best, any valid successes of the Church amount to nothing more “...than the slight twitches of the muscles of a drowsy giant, too sleepy to care ⁽⁵⁾.”

Granted the Bible counsels believers not to despise small things. (Zechariah 4.10) But at the same, the Church must realize that today is the day of small things.

The Church's confidence

However, like the disciples in their dilemma, we, too, have the power of Jesus Christ available to us ⁽⁶⁾. According to promise, Jesus Christ indwells every believer by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures record this priceless promise in John 14.9-23. In that section, the Lord Jesus gave these promises.

1. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to those who love Him.
2. He promised that the same God Who indwelled Him and performed mighty works and wonders in Him would indwell them, too.
3. He promised that He and the Father would abide within believers because of the Holy Spirit.

Then, every child of God has access to the same supernatural authority and ability of Christ that the disciples did!

Think of that for a moment. Words fail me to try to explain the full extent of that truth. The living Christ, Who sits at the right hand of the Father, resides within the life of every believer. That same Jesus, Whom the Bible predicts, describes, declares, reveals, and proves, lives within the child of God.

But sadly, presence and manifest presence are not the same. The mere fact that He is present does not automatically guarantee that He makes His presence known in experience. In fact, the Church today carries out Her affairs with little regard to the manifest presence of the Lord of the Church.

The manifest presence of the Lord of glory results only from deep desire ⁽⁷⁾. This deep desire reveals itself in the Christian by prayer and self-denial.

In His answer to the disciples for their failure to cure the sick boy, Jesus told them in Matthew 17:21:

“Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”

The Church of Jesus Christ today lacks this kind of deep desire for spiritual realities. We talk a good line and profess to apply it in life.

We even may adopt these techniques, i. e., prayer and fasting, as a sort of magical formula to follow to get what we want. Then when events turn out to our liking, we praise God for His “answer.”

Such trifling with God reminds me of the occasion in Exodus 32 when the Children of Israel asked Aaron to make them an idol.

Moses had gone up the mountain to meet with God. They questioned his return. They asked Aaron to make them a god to signify the one who would go before them.

When Aaron explained to Moses the process of the idol, he made it sound like a miracle had occurred. Note his answer in Exodus 32:24:

“And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

Yet, the Scriptures record the full truth in Exodus 32.4. Aaron had fashioned it with a tool and shaped the molten gold into a calf.

Too often, believers attempt to spiritualize the works of the flesh. God does not. The mere following a Biblical pattern does not authenticate the results. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day provide vivid proof of this truth.

They certainly prayed, fasted, and studied the Scriptures. Yet, they missed God completely.

True seeking after God does require prayer and self-denial. It is not a magical formula that you follow. It demands waiting upon God and waiting for God. It relies upon God alone, not any means used to pursue God.

It is vital to seek the manifest presence of Christ in our lives and in the midst of the Body of Christ. Jesus gives us the reason in John 15:5:

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”

Neither individually nor collectively can Christians accomplish God’s purposes without the manifest presence and power of Christ. True seeking after Him will produce evidence of His presence.

The Church today desperately needs the revelation of His supernatural authority and ability in at least six areas of spiritual life. Space does not permit a full explanation of them, so I will list them and briefly comment upon some of them.

The manifest presence and power of Christ will prove evident in these ways ⁽⁸⁾.

1. the supernatural regeneration of lost souls leading to true trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. The current emphasis of urging people “to decide for Christ” bears little resemblance to true Biblical salvation. Salvation is promoted as a solution to life’s mumps and measles and little more. Life is bad, so why not try Christ? It demands no repentance and requires no sacrifice. His presence brings true conviction of sin, repentance, and faith leading to salvation in Christ.
2. Godly saints. The Church today is filled with people who need a concordance and a definition of the Greek original to prove their sainthood. Godliness and holiness have fallen upon hard times. It has virtually no emphasis in either the pulpit or the pew.
3. Holy Spirit anointed preaching. Few preachers today follow the example of Paul in 2 Corinthians 2. He spoke of resting entirely upon the demonstration of the

- Spirit and of power, not popular, effective speaking techniques. Worse yet, even fewer people in the pew can discern the difference.
4. spiritual unction in worship. Enthusiasm and excitement are not spiritual unction. Neither is warm feelings. Again, few can distinguish the difference. His manifest presence brings a heavenliness to worship that surpasses enthusiasm, excitement, and warm feelings.
 5. the manifestation of Christ's supernatural authority and ability. The truest evidence of the lack of His presence is the absence of the supernatural. Everything about the Church today, even individual Christian lives, can be explained, the surest proof of the need for spiritual revival. The Church today avoids, even sometimes condemns, the supernatural work of Christ.
 6. the demonstration of His divine presence. As so often happens with worship, enthusiasm, excitement, and warm feelings make us feel that Christ has manifested Himself. However, these expressions fall by the wayside when Jesus makes his presence known. Words cannot describe it.

Without question, the Church today, perhaps even you, needs the manifest presence of Christ. Nothing short of spiritual revival will bring it to fruition.

He stands ready, willing, and able. We must humble ourselves before Him, seek earnestly His face, and He will answer.

Christ will live His life through those who rest in Him.

How will you respond to these truths that the Holy Spirit has revealed to you? You can reject them by denying or delaying their immediate application in your life. In either instance, you fail to believe and obey them.

Or, you can respond to them in your life by repenting of the sin that He has identified to you. A spiritually revived life will lead you to rely upon the Holy Spirit to bring Christ's life to fruition in and through you.

I pray that the Holy Spirit has shown you your true condition before God and the necessity of His supernatural work to apply Jesus Christ and these Biblical truths to your life.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will apply these Biblical truths in your life. May He come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.

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