

Where's the Power?¹

by SAMUEL H. MOFFETT

Born in Pyongyang, in what is now North Korea, Samuel Hugh Moffett is an alumnus of Wheaton College, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Yale University. He served as a missionary to China, 1947-1951, and to Korea, 1955-1981. He is presently the Henry Winters Luce Professor of Ecumenics and Mission at Princeton Theological Seminary. This address was delivered at the Presbyterian Congress on Renewal, held in Dallas, Texas, in January 1985.

Text: You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8; 2:1-8, 12-21)

MY TEXT is from the first chapter of the Book of Acts. Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples before he is taken up from them into heaven. And he says to them (in vs. 8), "You shall receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

That is the greatest of all the great promises of God. "You shall receive power. . . ." Now I know, strictly speaking one of God's promises is not greater than any other of God's promises. But to me this is the greatest because it is what I need most. You see, I'm a Presbyterian. I have order and decency up to here. But where's the power?

And this is the greatest of the five forms in which the Great Commission comes to us. "You shall be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth." There is a form of this commissioning in each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But this one in the book of Acts is the

greatest. Now I know again that strictly speaking no one form of God's commissioning is greater than any other. But to me this is the greatest because it is the one I need most. You see, I'm a Presbyterian. I have sentimental, upper-middle-class virtues up to here. But where's the power? Where's the power to propel us out of our comfortable, encapsulated churches and across the world? Our members are leaving; our missions declining. Where's the power? If power is what God promises, isn't that just what we all need most?

So let's begin with the PROMISE

"You shall receive power. . . ." I'm not so sure that the disciples really believed that promise. They were too much like us. They were about as unrenewed, and powerless, and unfocused, and puzzled a little group as most of us American Christians. And like us Presbyterians they were losing members. A few days before they had been twelve. Now there were only eleven in the inner circle. That's even worse than Presbyte-

¹ Used by permission of Word Books, Publisher, Waco, Texas.

rians. About forty thousand a year, isn't it that we're losing? One out of every eighty or so. The disciples lost one out of twelve!

So, disturbed and anxious, they turned to Jesus. But the first question they asked was the wrong question. All they wanted to know was, "When does the revolution begin?" "When will you bring in the Kingdom?" And they were still thinking in political terms, which is all right in its place, but this was neither the place nor the time for that question and Jesus turned them away. "That is not for you to know," he said. But because he loved them, he gave them a promise, a promise centered in a different kind of kingdom. "You will receive power . . . when the Holy Spirit comes, and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth." Then he left them.

He left them with many questions unanswered. He left them still unrenewed, still puzzled, still powerless. But isn't that how renewal always begins, not with power for the ambitious and powerful, but with a promise of power for those who have never had power, or have lost it?

That is how it began in Korea about a hundred years ago. The Korean church is now celebrating a hundred years of Protestant Christianity. But in some ways those first Korean Christians weren't much to celebrate. One of the best of them was a converted saloon keeper, only half-converted, or only partly renewed. Another was a twenty-seven-year-old student of the Chinese classics who fancied himself a philosopher and whose greatest religious experience had been a dream of the moon rising in his stomach. Still an-

other was wrestling with the awful secret that he had taken a second wife before he was converted, and could not bear to leave her. They were like the disciples. They weren't much to boast about.

But the gospel is good news. It is grace for the sinful, not for those who think they have no sin. It is healing for the sick, release for the captives, sight for the blind, peace for the troubled, justice for the down-trodden, renewal for empty hearts. And as at Jerusalem, it is power for the powerless.

Whether or not at that moment when Jesus was just about to leave them the disappointed little group of disciples believed the promise or not, they did the right thing. They trudged back down the hill into the city and "with the women, with one accord devoted themselves to prayer."

Gave themselves to prayer? Weren't there more important things to engage the attention of serious men and women that day. There were rumors of a conspiracy against the life of the emperor Tiberias in Rome—a good time for a revolution—and of a threatened famine spreading in North Africa, and news that the German barbarians were raiding again across the Rhine. Most people still think that those are the kinds of issues that matter. And they do matter. But all the disciples did was go home and pray!

Prayer, says this secular world, is the Christian's escape from reality. It's a "cop-out." That is what my wife was told at a Presbyterian meeting not long after we came back from Korea to America. She was speaking about the vitality and enthusiasm of the Korean Christians in prayer and

singing and personal witness, and one woman asked her, "What did you do for the people imprisoned by the government over there?" It was a good question. It needed to be asked, and it was not asked unkindly. But when Eileen paused and answered, "Well, there wasn't too much we could do. We thought many had been imprisoned unjustly, and we visited them when we could. And we prayed for them regularly." That was when someone whispered audibly, "Cop-out!"

Well, there are times when I, too, have been more tempted to revolution than to prayer. And apparently it was revolution the disciples were thinking about when they asked Jesus, "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" But, remembering how Jesus had answered them, instead of revolution they prayed. If you will forgive a personal word, when I was arrested in China during the revolution, and wondered what was going to happen to me, the knowledge that Christians were praying for me encouraged and sustained me far more than any hope I might have had that another revolution would come, a counter-revolution, and make everything all right.

Here is the paradox. Revolutions make the headlines. Prayer doesn't. But the world has forgotten about the plot against Tiberias that set tongues wagging in Jerusalem while the disciples prayed. It has forgotten the border raids across the Rhine. But it has never forgotten that credulous, leaderless, outcast little band that trudged down the hill into Jerusalem—and took the time to pray.

There was a time in Korea back

about eighty years ago that missionaries and Korean Christians were so discouraged about the prospects for the future of the church there that they began to wonder if their twenty years of pioneering since 1884 had been all in vain. The country was losing its independence to the Japanese. The missionaries were tired. The Korean Christians, like the Laodiceans, seemed to have "lost the love they had at first." Then it was that a Canadian medical doctor called them not to give up but to pray. And the little prayer meetings and Bible studies he started were the beginnings of the great Korean Revival of 1904-08. What happened?

What happened was POWER

This is my second point. What happens is that God keeps his promises. God promised power to the powerless disciples on the hill outside Jerusalem. They went back into the city and prayed, and the power came. Suddenly, at Pentecost, "a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and fire. . . ." The Spirit came, and life flamed again within them, as in coals dropped from a fireplace, apparently dead but breaking open in a shower of sparks. The Spirit brought flame back into the blue, bleak hearts of the disciples. It lifted a dispirited little group of ordinary men and women and sent them out to begin to change the world—to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But I must confess that the record of that first Pentecost—all wind and fire and many tongues—is a disconcerting passage to read today in a group of Presbyterians like this. It smacks too much of hot gossellers

and holy rollers and quakers and shakers and enthusiasts. It doesn't describe all that is best and most beautiful in Christian worship, does it? And yet the more I read of the history of the church, the more I am impressed with the fact that some of the most creative and effective periods in the church have been precisely those periods when the gospel was "hot" and not when it was most respectable.

If I were to pick my favorite spot in medieval Romanism I would choose the days of that gentle madman St. Francis of Assisi. And some of the greatest moments of Protestantism were in the times of Puritan enthusiasts and "great awakeners" like Jonathan Edwards. Too hot for Yale; I'm glad Presbyterian Princeton took him in. Quakers really quaked once, in the days of their intense beginnings; and when Methodism burned its way into the history of England and America, strong men and women roared and shook under the power of preachers like Wesley and Whitefield and Peter Cartwright. Long-haired dandies would come to Cartwright's camp-meetings. "They came to scoff," he wrote, "but they stayed to pray," and suddenly seized by the power their backs would bend almost to the breaking, then, the tension suddenly released by the peace of the Spirit, they would straighten up with such force that their long hair cracked like whips. Strange, bizarre, and to me, a little frightening.

But as someone has said, "The church of Christ has had more power when the world thought it was drunk, as at Pentecost, than when the world thought it was dead." And before

we condemn the outer extravagances of those meetings it might be well to ask two questions. First, is all that excitement necessary for a renewal? And second, when it does occur what is the inward, quickening power that produces it?

The answer to the first question is No. Not all revivals are fiery, and renewal can be as quiet as an inner thought. Almost always revival and renewal begin with prayer, and the best prayers are usually quiet. The revival of 1857 in New York, for example, was just a prayer meeting. No fire. No shouting. As J. Edwin Orr described it, Jeremiah Lanphier, a city missionary in lower Manhattan "passed out handbills inviting anyone interested to join him from 12 to 1 on Wednesdays for a prayer meeting. [They could] come for an hour or just five minutes. The first day six people came, the next day forty. Then [they made] it a daily instead of weekly meeting and within six months ten thousand business men were gathering [every day] for prayer in New York City. Within two years a million converts had joined American churches" (Orr 1965: 104, cited by Hazel Watson, p. 126). Just a prayer meeting, but what a prayer meeting!

The Great Revival in Korea was another matter. There was nothing low-key about that. It began with quiet prayer meetings, yes, but when it exploded into waves of wailing and weeping and writhing in agonies of confession, the missionaries were terrified. They stopped the meeting. They were "frightened by the presence of a Power which could work . . . wonders," as one of my father's colleagues described it (Blair, *Gold*

in Korea, p. 64). But the meetings could not be stopped, they went on and on and gradually even the most traditional-minded missionaries recognized that however disturbing its manifestations might appear, the power was not to be feared, and could not be resisted. It came from God.

The fire was not the power. It was only an outward sign of the power. Shouting and weeping are not the power. Sometimes the Bible uses quieter words to describe the mighty power of God. Elijah is on the mount and the Lord passes by. "And a great and strong wind" shook the mount and broke the rocks, "but God was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; . . . a fire, but God was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice, and when he heard it, Elijah hid his face in his mantle" for the still small voice was the voice of God (I Kings 19:11-14f.). There is no one way to describe the power. Sometimes it shakes and shouts. Sometimes the quiet words describe it best, words like cleansing and joy and love.

It is a cleansing power. Pentecost is rightly described as a filling of the Spirit, but before the filling there was an emptying. Peter knew. On a dark night not long before, he had felt the pain of the emptying. He heard a cock crow twice, and struck by the enormity of his sin, he "broke down and wept," says Mark. No cleansing; no power. So when the crowd, cut to the quick by his preaching, cried, "What shall we do?" Peter said, "Repent." Power without repentance is the wrong kind of power. "Repent," said Peter, "and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus for

the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38).

That is how it happened in Korea, too. Here is how a Korean minister who was there described it: "It was a great sign and wonder. . . . I saw some struggling to get up, then falling back in agony. Others again bounded to their feet to rid their souls of some long-covered sin. It seemed unwise that such confessions be made. . . . But there was no help for it. We were under an awful and mysterious power, helpless—missionaries as well as Koreans" (J. S. Gale, *Korea in Transition*, p. 206f.).

Those were Presbyterians he was describing. That is surprising, perhaps, but no less surprising than a fact which is closely related to it, the fact that now only eighty years later, by some accounts there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States. First the repentance, then the cleansing, then the power.

The power of the Spirit is also the power of a great joy. One of the historians of the early days of Christianity has written, "Unless [you] can understand the constant mood of victorious, jubilant happiness . . . [you] simply will not understand primitive [New Testament] Christianity" (Weiss). The crowds watching the disciples at Pentecost thought they were drunk. They were not. They were not intoxicated with wine; they were God-intoxicated. The Spirit had come to dwell with them, and it is no light thing to be the dwelling place of the living God. They were overcome; they were "surprised by joy."

The power of the Spirit is also the power of a great love. First, God's love: "In this is love," wrote John,

“not that we loved God but that God loved us.” It is not a love we manufacture; it is given by the Spirit to all who will receive it. “The fruit of the Spirit is love.” Even the enemies of those early Christians noticed this. “Oh how they love one another,” they said. It was not a separating stroke of lightning, but a warm, uniting love. In Korea, after the Great Revival, the Koreans said to the missionaries, “Some of you go back to John Calvin, and some to John Wesley, but we can go back no further than 1907 [and the Revival] when we first really knew the Lord Jesus Christ” (J. Fowler-Willing, p. 21).

But there was more to the love than Christians loving each other. It was a love that broke out beyond the bounds of the church, particularly to the poor and the sick and the oppressed. The greatest single tribute paid to those early Christians was a remark attributed to one of their most implacable enemies, Julian, the apostate emperor. He is said to have complained, as if the Christians were taking unfair advantage of him, “These Christians feed not only their own poor, but ours as well.”

So there was cleansing, and joy and love in the power that came at Pentecost. The power was not the wind and not the fire. The power is the Spirit who, with the Father and the Son, is the One God who creates, sustains, and energizes all that ever was or is and will be. The Spirit is the promised Power, and is always there. But an important practical question remains: What is the power for?

The Power is for WITNESS

That is my third point. What happened when the power came that

first day of Pentecost in Jerusalem? Peter went out to preach. Pentecost was more than an experience of renewal. It was more than a season of rejoicing. It was a call to mission.

Tradition tells us that every one of the inner circle of the eleven disciples at Pentecost became a missionary. John went to Asia Minor, James to the Arabs, Andrew to the Goths, Peter to Rome, and so on. Even doubting Thomas, somewhat reluctantly as usual, went to far-off India according to the tradition. That’s why they were called apostles, which means missionaries, “ones who were sent out.” Had not the Lord said, “You shall receive power . . . and you shall be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth.” Power is for witness, and witness is for the whole world.

What happened when the power came in Korea back in 1907? They organized a presbytery. I suppose, that sounds like an anticlimax. If so, think again. It was no accident that along with the power of the great Korean revival came the organization of the first presbytery of a Korean Presbyterian Church. The two are not in tension. They belong together. Listen to John R. Mott, who was not only a great evangelist but a great churchman and organizer and ecumenical leader. “Pray as if there were no such thing as organization,” he once said, “and organize as if there were no such thing as prayer.”

The Koreans did both in that great revival year of 1907. They prayed and they organized. They prayed, and the power came. They organized—organized the first self-governing, autonomous Korean presbytery—and the presbytery sent out its first missionary, a Korean.

Let me tell you that story in a little more detail. It was at that first presbytery meeting that the first seven graduates of the little theological seminary which had been founded a few years earlier were ordained. They were awed and a little daunted by thoughts of what this would mean in terms of the spiritual responsibilities this would bring to each of them. Then another thought occurred to them. Just as they were about to come into the meeting, one of them said, "We will be the first Korean ministers of the Korean church. But a real church has more than ministers. It has missionaries." And they looked hard at a burly young man who had come a little late into their class at the seminary. "You stoned the first missionary you ever saw, didn't you," they said. And he hung his head. It was true. "Then you are going to be our first missionary," they said, and walked in to be ordained. And the moderator of the presbytery, my father, who happened to be the missionary that man had stoned sixteen years before, ordained the man who had stoned him, and the church sent him off as their own first missionary, to a strange island off the southern coast where he in turn was stoned when he first stood up to preach the gospel.

Power is for witness, and if we are skeptical about associating Presbyterian ecclesiastical structures with spiritual power and missionary witness, we are either underestimating or underemploying one of the Spirit's gifts to us as Presbyterians, the gift of organization.

But where is the power? I love the Church and I believe in it. I love our own Presbyterian segment of the Body of Christ most of all. But where

is the power? At Pentecost, the power in a little group of about 120 men and women swept three thousand people into the fellowship in one day. In the American church, according to statistics I saw some years ago, it takes fifty-four Christians working a whole year to bring just one new member into the church. And among Presbyterians we lose more than we win. Has the power gone? Since coming back from Korea I have found more life in this old church than some give it credit for, but I must admit that our statistical record is utterly appalling. Now I do not worship statistics of church growth. I know they are often wrong. I know that there are tares as well as wheat in rapid growth. And I know that numerical growth can come from other factors than spiritual power in the church. Nevertheless, compare the Presbyterian record in America with Korea. In 1974 there were 1,500,000 Presbyterians in Korea. Ten years later, in 1984, there were between four and five million. Doesn't it say something about the distribution of spiritual power in the two churches, here and there, that while Korean Presbyterians were tripling their membership, American United Presbyterians, as some of us were then, were losing about a third of ours, and cutting back on the number of our overseas missionaries at the same time.

Has the power gone? Forty years ago I was so discouraged about the Presbyterian church that I wrote impulsively to my father, "I don't think I'll go to Princeton. I'm not sure I want to be a Presbyterian." My wise father wrote back. He said, "Sam, you'll find a lot of good Christians outside the Presbyterian church and

a lot of good missionaries, but before you make your decision, why don't you look around and see if you can't find some places where the Holy Spirit is working through the Presbyterians. And if the Holy Spirit can work through the Presbyterian church, perhaps you can."

There is still power in our church. There is power because our Lord has promised it power and the Spirit still works in the church. There comes a time to stop criticizing the church, and to try praying for it. Not for numbers, for more Presbyterians, but for the power Jesus promised which is power for witness, power for mission. And when the power comes don't keep it for Presbyterians. Take it out across the world in mission. Two-thirds of this world does not have enough to eat. It goes to bed hungry every night. Mission is feeding. Most of the world suffers and lies in pain. Mission is healing. More than half of the adult world is blind. It doesn't know how to read. Mission is opening the eyes, and teaching to read. Most of the world is oppressed by unjust powers. Mission is liberation. So go forth and heal and feed and liberate. We can and must join in the struggle against all the world's ills—hunger, sickness, suffering, slavery—but that will not complete the mission. The greatest need will still be unmet. When the power comes, we must also go forth and preach the good news. Two-thirds of the world is still without effectual knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The power is already here. The trouble is with us. We do not call for the power; we don't get it. And then we complain that we don't have

it. We are more naive even than the Arab chieftains Lawrence of Arabia brought with him to the Paris Peace Conference. Perhaps you have read the story. These men of the desert were amazed at many things, but nothing astonished them half so much as the running water in their hotel rooms. They knew the scarcity of water and its value, yet here it was to be had by the turning of a tap, free and seemingly exhaustless. When they prepared to leave Paris, Lawrence found them trying to detach the faucets so that out in their dry deserts they might always have water. He tried to explain that behind the flowing taps were huge reservoirs, and that without this supply the faucets were useless. But the Arabs insisted. They were sure that the magic instruments would give them water forever.

Are we not even more credulous in our Christian lives? They expected water from unattached faucets. We look for water to run from a closed tap. In the Holy Spirit are deep reservoirs of power, wells of water springing up into everlasting life. But the Holy Spirit cannot flow through a closed tap, he cannot work through an unyielded life.

So open up the taps. But watch out. The promise is for any who will believe and receive. And when by faith and by grace we turn the taps and the power flows, watch out! The Spirit works when, where, and how He pleases. When the power comes, it is not you but the Spirit who controls the temperature. You may pray for the fire, and the Spirit may choose to send a cool, refreshing rain and a still small voice. Or you may think you will be more comfortable with

the still, small voice, and sometimes, as in Korea, there comes the fire and the earthquake.

But don't ask me again, Where's the power? It is already here. It is the same Spirit, the same promise, and the same power that has always been here. For Jesus is still saying to his disciples:

"You shall receive power . . . when the Spirit comes . . . and you shall be my witnesses."

Witnesses to the ends of this dry and thirsty, this sick and hungry, this oppressed, frightened, lost world. You shall be witnesses that the Savior has come, and will come again, and that the Spirit is already here.