

Article of the Month – November 2010

Power Encounters as Missionary Method – VI – Acts

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We continue the series about power encounters in spiritual frontline battles in the OT with two similar ones in the NT. I exclude the description of power encounters in Jesus' ministry, because there are so many; if only we think of all occasions where He cast out demons, stilled a storm (meant to destroy Him), not to speak of raising the dead and confronting the army that was about to arrest Him.¹ We will therefore only look at such encounters in the book of Acts and later at some in the book of Revelation.

OT theology differs from NT theology: in the former it was 'you will be blessed if you do right, but punished if you sin'.² In the latter that is no longer the case. Rather, we see new dimensions, which include all sorts of suffering for the sake of righteousness and the expansion of God's Kingdom. In the OT power encounters, the death of the 'hero' would have been interpreted as his defeat; in the NT that is no longer the case. OT power encounters were meant to show God's power on earth only; NT power encounters are mainly – but not exclusively – aiming at heavenly, sometimes invisible, yet eternal victories.

Power encounters in words we see e.g. in the apostles' reply to the Sanhedrin: 'should we not rather obey God than you?'³ although the words had been accompanied by an act of healing. A similar encounter we see when Peter confronts Ananias & Sapphira – both drop dead.⁴

Power encounters with releases we see twice: the apostles were incarcerated and liberated overnight by angelic intervention.⁵ Years later a similar occurrence happened to Peter.⁶

A new form of power encounter results in *martyrdom*, when Stephen is being stoned after his verbal attack on the Sanhedrin.⁷ This may have looked like defeat at first sight, but if we take into consideration how the church grew by the spreading of the gospel through Judea and Samaria, we can only conclude that through the death of one man, many came to faith and the borders of the kingdom of darkness were pushed back. It was the first instant where the blood of a martyr became the seed of the church.⁸ Not that this was an entirely new principle; a people, growing in spite of persecution we already saw at the time that Israel was in Egypt.⁹

¹ John 18:6

² Think about e.g. Deut. 28 or the comments Job received from his friends

³ Acts 3:1 – 4:22; see also 5:27-32

⁴ 5:1-11

⁵ 5:19

⁶ 12:1-11

⁷ 7:51-60

⁸ As Tertullian said

⁹ Ex. 1:12

Another form of power encounter resulted in the *conversion* of a dangerous opponent, Saul of Tarsus, a most notorious church persecutor.¹⁰ This was a direct confrontation between Jesus and a man, that resulted in that man's *salvation*. At another occasion we see such a direct confrontation between God and a man, king Herod, who accepted worship and failed to give glory to God. The result was *judgment*, the very opposite of salvation.¹¹ God does not give His glory to another.¹² The first man, now called Paul, reacted very differently under similar circumstances; he absolutely refused to be worshipped as a god, during his first missionary journey, some years later.¹³

Another new type of power encounter resulted in the *opposite of healing*, when Paul and Barnabas were evangelizing the isle of Cyprus and witnessed about Christ to the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus. At this man's court the apostles met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet by the name of Bar-Jesus, who opposed their gospel ministry. At that, Paul pronounced a judgment of temporary blindness. The *result* was that the proconsul came to faith in the Lord Jesus.¹⁴

Later, when Paul and his colleagues had gone to Europe, they engaged in a *power encounter with a demon*, a spirit of divination that had possessed a slave girl in the city of Philippi.¹⁵ Although her words were literally correct, Paul did not accept that sort of demonic 'advertisement' any more than Jesus had accepted it at another occasion.¹⁶ So, Paul cast out the evil spirit and after severe suffering saw as *result* the beginning of a church at Philippi.

A sort of (attempted) power encounter took place when the sons of Jewish priest Sceva, who apparently were not Christians, tried to imitate the casting out of demons as they had seen Paul do. But the kingdom of darkness is not divided against itself,¹⁷ as they experienced soon enough.¹⁸ It is obvious that no one has authority over the powers of darkness, unless he has a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

Yet, the Lord used this ridiculous situation to instill a sense of awe and an act of cleansing from occult practices among the new believers at Ephesus.¹⁹

One of the last miracles in the book of Acts is, that Paul does not die after having been bitten by a viper.²⁰ This reminds us of *a power encounter Jesus promised His disciples* when He gave them the Great Commission: '... they will pick up snakes with their hands and when they drink deadly poison it will not hurt them at all...'²¹

Power encounters as missionary method have not been abolished after the 1st century. They are to be accepted and used whenever the Lord leads missionaries into comparable situations. We will also see them during future events in the book of Revelation. Many contemporary missionaries know the use of power encounters as missionary method by experience!

¹⁰ Acts 9:1-19

¹¹ 12:21-23

¹² Is. 42:8

¹³ Acts 14:8-18

¹⁴ 13:6-12

¹⁵ 16:16-18

¹⁶ Luke 4:34,35

¹⁷ 11:14-18

¹⁸ Acts 19:13-16

¹⁹ 19:17-20

²⁰ 28:3-6

²¹ Mark 16:18