

“Empowering the Empty-Handed”: Spirit-Power and the Church-in-Mission

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Abstract

Pentecostalism has traditionally emphasised spiritual “power” as a defining feature of its identity and practice, but often with a somewhat narrow understanding of what Spirit-power entails. This chapter offers a theological and missional re-reading of Spirit-power through the lens of Jesus’s Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:18-19), situating Pentecostal empowerment within God’s Jubilee mission to the poor and marginalised. Drawing on biblical theology, social analysis of poverty, and Pentecostal scholarship, the chapter argues that true Spirit-power is not coercive or self-serving but redemptive, relational, and cruciform. Poverty is understood not merely as economic deprivation but as a multidimensional condition sustained by social, cultural, and spiritual systems of disempowerment. The Incarnation, servanthood, and the Cross are decisive moments when the true nature of Spirit-power is revealed. Pentecostal mission, rightly understood, embodies this kenotic power through practices of healing, justice, liberation, and self-giving love among the “empty-handed.”

Key Words: church-in-mission; Cross; empowerment; empty-handed; Holy Spirit; Jubilee; kenosis; marginalisation; mission; Nazareth Manifesto; Pentecostalism; poverty; power and power abuse; servanthood; social transformation; Spirit-power

Introduction

Pentecostals love to talk about power – it is an essential part of our DNA. The “power” motif is a prominent feature of Pentecostal-Charismatic faith, occupying centre stage in the worship and practice of Spirit-filled churches. Pentecostals are thus moved by “powerful” preaching, services, and prayer meetings and excited at the prospect of “power” encounters. This is as it should be – to be Pentecostal means to be baptised, filled, and enthused by the Holy Spirit and to celebrate life in the Spirit.

But what does the biblical notion of “Spirit-power” really mean? How does one distinguish between the “power of the Holy Spirit” and “Spirit-power” in general? What is at the heart of the church’s experience and appropriation of true “Spirit-power”?

The Nazareth Manifesto

Jesus made the most elaborate statement of his mission at the launch of his ministry from the synagogue in Nazareth when he announced, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).¹ Jesus’s reading of this passage from Isaiah 61 was an unmistakable reference to the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25) – a year of celebration, rest, and freedom when no crops were planted, all debts cancelled, all property returned to its original owner, all slaves set free. For Jews in Jesus’s time, the Year of Jubilee meant much more, which is why as he finished the reading and sat down, all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. There was a holy hush as he then announced: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Jesus’s announcement, commonly referred to as the Nazareth Manifesto, marked an earth-shaking event: the Messiah has arrived and will fix all that’s wrong with our world – he will bring in the kingdom of God and usher in an ideal era of peace and prosperity, righteousness, and justice. It finds resonance in Acts 1:8, where empowerment precedes mission: the same Spirit who anoints Jesus in Luke 4 descends upon the church at Pentecost in Acts 2 and continues to empower the church for mission. The Nazareth Manifesto is thus both Christological and ecclesiological, defining the Spirit-shaped mission of Jesus as well as extending it to the vocation of the Spirit-empowered church. It has special significance for Pentecostals who prioritise the lived experience of the Spirit, calling Spirit-filled Christ-followers to proclaim good news to the poor, heal the sick, and deliver the oppressed in anticipation of the final consummation of God’s Kingdom purpose.

Poverty Decoded

Luke’s Gospel consistently highlights God’s preferential concern for the poor (Luke 6:20; 14:13, 21); his use of the term *ptōchoi* encompasses the economically destitute and socially marginalised. Reference to “spiritually” poor might be a secondary application, but the primary reference is the simplest OT meaning: the orphan, widow, oppressed, and exploited. Thus, the term *poor* denotes not just economically poor but also those who are powerless on the margins of society – what Indian thinker and development practitioner Jayakumar Christian vividly portrays as the “*empty-handed*.”²

The poor are *vulnerable*, lacking support mechanisms and the capacity or resources to defend themselves against outside threats from people, nature, or systems. They are *voiceless*, without access to decision-making processes or to justice. Their voices are either not heard or prevented from being heard. The poor

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

² Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power, and the Kingdom of God*, 2nd ed. (Acorn Press, 2011).

are also *marginalised* – “outcastes” from mainstream society, largely due to prejudice based on race, caste, social status, or ethnicity and with little or no access to health care, education, social contacts, and employment. Consequently, they end up being *powerless*, rarely able to help themselves or change their lives due to factors out of their control.

Poverty is a complex, multifaceted social reality involving a range of interconnected physical, mental, social, and spiritual causes. Bryant Myers makes two key assertions regarding poverty: first, that *the nature of poverty is fundamentally relational* – it is the result of sin’s effect on all human relationships: with self, within community, with the outside world/environment, with God; relationships do not work when they are unjust and not aligned with God’s intent of fullness of life for all people (*shalom*).³ Second, Myers notes that *the cause of poverty is essentially spiritual*. Why is there so much injustice in our world today? Why are people unable to love our neighbours as we should? In biblical terms, it is *sin* that distorts human relationships and the root cause of the oppression and injustice in our world.⁴

Myers’ conclusions are derived significantly from Christian’s study. Christian’s analysis led him to conclude that the sin at the root of the problem of poverty is manifested in a “web of lies,” by which the poor find themselves trapped within a complex framework of disempowering systems designed to reinforce their powerlessness.⁵ Building on Christian’s analysis, Myers explains how these interacting systems work to entrap the poor as follows.

a) Biophysical System – This refers to the inherent liabilities of the poor such as hunger and lack of access to basic necessities such as clean water, sanitation, and education. The potential consequences of malnourishment, disease, and illiteracy make the poor – weak in mind and body – easily susceptible to deception by the non-poor, deepening their experience of powerlessness.

b) Social-Economic System – Social structures and narratives tend to justify the privileged position of the non-poor so that they see themselves as superior, entitled to exercise power and to “play God” in the lives of the poor. Religious systems, the law, media, government, and political power tend to reinforce their privileged position. In many traditional cultures, the right of one race, caste, class, or gender to rule over the others is legitimised as necessary to maintain order and prevent social chaos. The poor accept passively the controlling narrative and thus become captive to “god-complexes”⁶ of the non-poor.

c) Cultural System – False/inadequate worldviews both legitimise “god-complexes” of the non-poor and deepen the powerlessness of the poor. For instance, the Hindu concept of *karma* causes the poor to believe that their current state is a consequence of how they have lived in a previous life. Caste, class, gender, status, and even physical disability are explained based on beliefs that

³ Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Orbis Books, 2011), 86-87.

⁴ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 88.

⁵ Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 168-69.

⁶ Christian’s expression in *God of the Empty-Handed*, 166-67.

undermine the possibility of a better life. The poor are resigned to their fate without any hope of real change in this life.

d) Spiritual System – There’s an even deeper spiritual dimension to the problem of poverty. Both poor and non-poor have been enslaved to the “basic principles of this world” (Gal 4:3). Furthermore, Christian points beyond the human sphere to the cosmic evil adversary, the one who controls the “principalities and powers,” spiritual forces of evil which work actively to create and sustain poverty (Eph 6:12) working against fullness of life for all people (John 10:10).

e) Personal System – All these systems (a–d) work together to crush the identity of the poor and strip them of any sense of worth. The poor lose self-awareness of their true identity as those created in the image of God. This is the deepest, most tragic expression of poverty – spiritual poverty of the worst kind – in which the poor accept their marred identity and act in ways that are sub-human.

All these disempowering systems come together, weaving a “web of lies” that distorts the identity of the poor, leaving them trapped and powerless. When the poor accept this state as normal and unalterable, their poverty is complete. However, the “web of lies” and systems that create poverty do not exist in abstractions; they are practised and perpetuated by people: “At the end of the day, people are the cause of poverty, and it is people who must change for things to change.”⁷

The only hope the poor have of breaking free from the disempowering “web of lies” is if they can recover their true identity as children of God, created in God’s image to be stewards of his creation. The non-poor likewise need to experience a radical change of mind and heart, to see ways in which they may be consciously or unwittingly helping to perpetuate systems that keep the poor trapped and powerless. Such transformation of both the poor and non-poor is only possible in and through the power of the good news of the Kingdom’s arrival in Christ.

Power Deconstructed

The concept of power is difficult to define. Max Weber and the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault, both influential modern thinkers, define power in essentially sociological terms.⁸ Jeffrey Pfeffer’s definition is more relevant to our purpose: “The potential ability to influence behaviour, to change the course

⁷ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 83.

⁸ Max Weber defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1922; repr., University of California Press, 1978), 53; Michel Foucault views power as producing reality and an ubiquitous means of social control, the interaction of influences present in any group or society in *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 93; cf. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1979), 194.

of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things that they would not otherwise do.”⁹

In their widely influential typology of sources of power in leadership, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven define six forms of “social power” (as noted in Henry Mintzberg),¹⁰ which I have compressed to the following four categories for the purpose of this study:

a) Coercive Power – the use of fear of punishment or threat to force someone to comply against their will, such as loss of employment or reduced wages, excommunication, psychological abuse, and fear of cultic power.

b) Reward Power – the use of incentives to induce compliance, such as salaries, bonuses, allocation of resources, access to the leader, public recognition for good performance, and expectation of divine favour/blessing.

c) Legitimate Power – based on the formal authority derived from a position or role a leader holds, followers are expected to comply with the leader’s will and expectations. Similar, yet distinct, is **Referent Power**, based not on formal authority as much as on the personal qualities of a leader that attract trust, commitment, and respect.

d) Expert Power – based on confidence in the specialised knowledge, skills, and ability of a person, and **Informational Power** – based on a person’s control over the sources and dissemination of information or powers of persuasion.

In an influential study based on twenty years of research, Dacher Keltner reframes the power construct, seeing it essentially as a positive and socially constructive force, the ability to do good for others, expressed in daily life.¹¹ This notion finds interesting resonance with Andy Crouch’s analysis of the Christian conception of power.¹² Crouch’s view is not explicitly framed along the lines of a biblical exposition, but his description is deeply rooted in and infused with biblical content.

Crouch sees power as a fundamental feature of life and makes a compelling case for power to be viewed as a *gift*, rooted in creation and intimately tied to the role human beings play as image bearers.¹³ Crouch is convinced that although the gift of power today is flawed as a result of the Fall, it can be redeemed to serve our Creator’s original intent. He thus concludes that “Power is a gift bestowed by God on human beings, his image bearers for the purpose of flourishing – an instrument for creating, empowering, adding value and meaning to all of life.”¹⁴

⁹ Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 30.

¹⁰ The French and Raven model remains a paradigm largely undisputed in studies of social power; see Henry Mintzberg, *Power in and around Organizations* (Prentice-Hall, 1983), 120.

¹¹ Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence* (Penguin Books, 2017).

¹² Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (IVP, 2013).

¹³ Crouch, *Playing God*, 12. For him, the deepest truth about the world is that “The power to love, and in loving, to create together, is the true power that hums at the heart of the world.” *Playing God*, 45, 52.

¹⁴ Crouch, *Playing God*, 25.

There is a dark side to power, of course, and in the wrong hands it can be extremely dangerous.¹⁵ Power is both intoxicating and addictive, and research shows that those possessing the power of wealth, education, or corporate position are more prone to misuse power.¹⁶ The painful truth is that the abuse of power can be observed within the church as well and, if we are honest, perhaps on occasion, within ourselves. While many abuses within the church and Christian organisations overlap with those which occur in the secular world, certain forms of abuse are unique to spiritual leadership.¹⁷

Pentecostal Power in God's Jubilee Mission

Jesus's announcement of *Jubilee* was a Pentecostal declaration. Jubilee is God's movement for *rescue and restoration*, calling the world back to himself and to his original purpose in creation. It is God acting in power to set things right in our messed-up world, his Spirit-power unleashed against the forces of evil. This is why Jesus came: to launch God's rescue mission, heaven's great reversal against sin and its destructive impact upon the human heart and life. He accomplished this as he healed the sick, fed the hungry, loved the outcast, delivered the oppressed, died on the Cross, and rose again on the third day.

In seeking to live out their identity as a Spirit-empowered church-in-mission, Pentecostals have consistently affirmed that spiritual power is not an end in itself but a means of advancing God's Kingdom. They see themselves as an unstoppable "Jubilee" movement of Spirit-empowered people called to carry out God's mission of redemption, justice, and restoration in the world. According to Amos Yong, the Spirit's empowerment is relational and missional, intended to "transform communities through the practices of healing, reconciliation, and justice."¹⁸ Allan Anderson shows how Pentecostal teaching on spiritual warfare resonates deeply with prevailing worldviews in the Global South, allowing for healing and deliverance and offering holistic liberation to people bound by sickness or oppression.¹⁹ Walter Hollenweger argues that the gift of prophecy in

¹⁵ "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power"—a famous quote sometimes ascribed to Abraham Lincoln, but more likely the words of the nineteenth-century American politician Robert G. Ingersoll; see Reuters Fact Check, "Fact Check: 'Test a Man's Character' Quote Misattributed to Abraham Lincoln." Reuters, August 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-abrahamlincoln-power-idUSL1N2PA1V7>.

¹⁶ Bill Treasurer, "When Leadership Turns Dangerous," *Forbes*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/12/12/when-leadership-turns-dangerous/?sh=67209aaa55f3>; cf. Dacher Keltner, "Don't Let Power Corrupt You," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/10/dont-let-power-corrupt-you>.

¹⁷ See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Power for God's Sake: Power and Abuse in the Local Church* (Paternoster, 1998), 5. The following section of this chapter looks at this aspect of power abuse a little more closely.

¹⁸ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005), 181.

¹⁹ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 118.

Pentecostal practice functions as social critique by which spiritual power has served as a democratising force, empowering the marginalised to proclaim God’s Word.²⁰

Donald Miller’s and Tetsunao Yamamori’s landmark study documented a wide range of ways in which Pentecostals have sought to fulfil God’s mission to the poor and marginalised.²¹ Pentecostals today preach the good news of Jesus, heal the sick, deliver the demonised, plant new churches, and take the gospel to unreached people groups. They also engage with social issues: emergency relief in response to humanitarian crises; upliftment of the poor and powerless through medical work, education, economic upliftment, and community development; rehabilitation of AIDS patients and drug addicts; and rescue and restoration of victims of sex trafficking.

The Pentecostal message is thus very good news among the poor because it meets immediate felt needs and provides a powerful spiritual impetus and community support for a better life. The liberating empowerment it offers frees victims of injustice and abuse from captivity to the powers of evil and offers hope to those who feel powerless. Thus, sociologists like Paul Freston see the modern Pentecostal revival as essentially an upward movement of empowerment of the poor, a counter-establishment movement among the poor and marginalised – a movement of “globalization from below.”²²

This feature can be observed in Pentecostal movements in different contexts across the globe. For instance, church historian V. V. Thomas has drawn attention to the early Pentecostal social impact on the empowerment of *Dalits* – untouchable outcasts from the traditional social hierarchy in India.²³ Pentecostalism offered *Dalits* promise of equal access to spiritual empowerment, freeing them from millennia-long oppression and subjugation of caste Hindus as well as casteism prevalent within older Christian denominations.²⁴

While Pentecostals today are at the vanguard of God’s mission to the poor, serious weaknesses remain within the Pentecostal Spirit-power culture that must be humbly and honestly acknowledged. Pentecostal mission scholar Wonsuk Ma laments the widespread prevalence of moral failure in many of the Pentecostal-Charismatic leaders.²⁵ Reflecting from the African context, Nigerian theologian

²⁰ Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Hendrickson, 1997), 355.

²¹ Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (University of California Press, 2007), 213.

²² Paul Freston, “Evangelicalism and Globalization,” in *A Global Faith: Essays on Evangelicalism and Globalization*, ed. Mark Hutchinson and Ogbu Kalu (Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998), 72-74.

²³ *Dalit* is a designation for a heterogenous group of people scattered across India, traditionally regarded as untouchable and who fall outside the traditional four-fold Hindu caste system; they are considered impure and unclean and are therefore physically excluded and socially isolated from the rest of society, V. V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism, Spirituality of the Empowered Poor* (Asian Trading Co., 2008), 1.

²⁴ Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism*, 152-53.

²⁵ Wonsuk Ma, “Tragedy of Spirit-Empowered Heroes: A Close Look at Samson and Saul,” *Spiritus* 2, nos. 1–2 (2017): 23-38; for a more scathing critique, see Steven

Alade Tayo Omokayode echoes Ma's concern in speaking of the abuse of spiritual gifts among Pentecostals.²⁶

Pentecostal ministers used by God in supernatural gifts are sometimes guilty of abusive leadership and misuse spiritual authority to control and manipulate followers.²⁷ Giftedness, success, access to wealth, influence, and social recognition – coupled with a sense of infallibility, invincibility, and lack of accountability – often leads to “power intoxication” among leaders. “Cultic” power abuse by leaders in the form of sexual exploitation, financial corruption, and autocratic manipulation is also prevalent in some Pentecostal circles.²⁸ Such exploitative practices are abuses of Spirit-power and clearly at odds with Jesus's mission to see the holistic flourishing and empowerment of the poor.

The Power of the Cross in the Spirit-Power of the Church

What, then, is the true nature of Spirit-power that accompanied Jesus's Jubilee declaration and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and on Spirit-filled believers since? There are three key moments that help us understand the true meaning of Spirit-power manifested in the Christ-event and bestowed on the church through the Holy Spirit. These must not be viewed in isolation but are significant, organically related moments that take us to the heart of true Spirit-power as it relates to God's Kingdom.

The Incarnation

The context of this verse, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9), is Paul's appeal to the Macedonian believers to be generous in their giving to the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He points to the example of Christ's supreme act of gracious, self-sacrificial giving in the Incarnation as the motivation for giving sacrificially. Although Christ was “rich,” possessing divine glory, eternal attributes, and all the fullness of God, he became “poor” for our sake by taking on human nature with all its weaknesses, living humbly, and ultimately dying on the Cross. But although Christ's “becoming poor” here is usually understood as referring to the exchange of his heavenly status for an earthly state, as one commentator notes, “It is possible that

Lambert, *Charismatic Captivation: Authoritarian Abuse & Psychological Enslavement in Neo-Pentecostal Churches* (SLM Publications, 2003).

²⁶ “Beware when spiritual gifts are used as a means of manipulation, power, or control in personal and/or church relationships.” Alade Tayo Omokayode, “Pentecostal Youth and the Abuse of Spiritual Gifts,” *Light in a Once-Dark World* 5 (January 2023): 209.

²⁷ Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray Dempster et al. (Regnum, 1999), 79.

²⁸ Simon Chan warns against the tendency towards “commodification of the Spirit,” where spiritual power becomes instrumentalised for personal gain and equated with material blessing in *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 145.

it reveals a literal renunciation of wealth on the part of Jesus – or at least highlights the low economic level endured in his earthly ministry.”²⁹

Christ’s great act of self-emptying (*kenosis*) is described in the first part of the Christological hymn (*Carmen Christi*) in Philippians 2:6-11. He who was in “very nature” God took on the “very nature” of a servant, suggesting that during his earthly ministry, Jesus did not simply “appear to be” or “acted like” a servant – *he was a servant*. Servanthood was essential to Christ’s taking on the status of humanity and his self-understanding of his role and mission was in direct fulfilment of the ‘Servant Songs’ in Isaiah’s prophecy.³⁰

The Incarnation was the supreme model of redemptive generosity and Jesus’s *kenosis* an expression of downward social mobility. By his birth into a marginal family, life under imperial occupation, and death as a condemned criminal, he identified closely with the economically and politically oppressed. Thus, Jesus does not merely serve the poor – he *becomes poor* (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). The poor are not just the objects of Christ’s compassion – they are where Christ is already present.

The Last Supper

John 13:1-14 stands alongside Philippians 2:6-11 as one of the New Testament’s clearest redefinitions of power. Jesus’s view of power is vividly portrayed in his acted-out parable during the Last Supper as a prelude to his Farewell Discourses (John 13-16). John presents Jesus’s act of footwashing as flowing out of his profound power-consciousness: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist” (John 13:3-4). *All things* are under his authority, and his supreme sovereignty is affirmed, categorically based on the fact that he has come *from* God and will be returning *to* God. Servanthood here flows from unshakeable identity, not insecurity: Jesus serves not because he lacks power but because he possesses it supremely.

Footwashing was the household task assigned to the lowest slaves, but this most lowly of servant actions was not just a symbolic gesture of humility. This was the means he chose to use to engrave the heart of his message on the hearts and minds of his disciples; a powerful embodied expression of covenantal love and a demonstration of true Spirit-power. For Jesus, power is not the capacity to control others but the freedom to love unselfishly and sacrificially. The one with “all things under his power,” who commands the universe, kneels before his followers and chooses a towel instead of a throne. For power in the kingdom of God is measured by how far it is willing to descend for the sake of love.

The Cross

The lowest point of Christ’s condescension is captured in Philippians 2:8 – “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient

²⁹ T. E. Schmidt, “Riches & Poverty,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. E. Hawthorne et al. (IVP, 1993), 826.

³⁰ Key messianic prophecies of Isaiah include 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.

to death – even death on a cross!” In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul refers to Christ crucified as “the power of God,” but how is the Cross of Christ a demonstration of spiritual power? The salvific power of the Cross was clearly demonstrated when Christ disarmed the demonic powers of darkness and evil authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them by his death on the Cross (Col 2:15). Thus, the moment Jesus appears most powerless is the precise moment when he exercises the greatest moral and redemptive power in history.

A vital key to understanding how Spirit-power is displayed in the life of a believer is found in one of Paul’s “hardship catalogues”³¹ in 2 Corinthians 4:7–12. Gordon Fee maintains that this passage is not just an account of Paul’s suffering and hardship for the sake of the gospel, but rather illustrates his experience of “empowering in the midst of weakness.”³² In contrast to his detractors, who boast about their “powerful” visions, revelations, and accomplishments, Paul rests his claim to apostleship on “God’s power” working through his weakness. Fee thus asserts that “Weakness/hardship and Spirit-empowering go together in Paul’s thinking.”³³

The expression “treasure in jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7) contrasts the relative ordinariness of the receptacle with the inestimable value of the “all-surpassing power” (v. 7) of God within it. The four vivid antitheses that follow illustrate both the weakness of Paul and God’s preserving power: “hard pressed ... but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed” (vv. 8–9). Paul then highlights the inherent paradox in how both the death and resurrection-life of Jesus were simultaneously evident in his experience (vv. 10–11). He then asserts the heart of the meaning of Spirit-power: “So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (v. 12). This is where any true biblical notion of Spirit-power finds both its starting point and ultimate destination – the Cross!³⁴

This truth is powerfully illustrated in sociologist Rodney Stark’s well-known study prompted by his curiosity about how an obscure, marginal Jesus Movement, opposed by the most powerful empire in history, took over the Western world in just a few hundred years. Stark concludes that a key factor that

³¹ In Hellenistic philosophical literature, a “hardship catalogue” emphasises how the sage was self-sufficient in spite of the outside afflictions that he or she had to endure; some scholars see Paul as making use of this genre in this context in several places in his Corinthian epistles, where he lists the hardships he experienced in the service of the gospel. See John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBL Dissertation Series 99 (Scholars Press, 1988), 209–33.

³² Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1994), 333.

³³ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 333.

³⁴ In concluding his discussion on 2 Corinthians 4:7–12, Fee observes: “What is striking in all this is the inclusion of the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a list that fully affirms weakness ... the Spirit in Paul leads not to triumphalism, but to triumph in Christ ... For Paul the power lies ... not in deliverance from hardships, but in the powerful working of the Spirit that enables and empowers him for ministry even in the midst of such adversity.” *God’s Empowering Presence*, 335.

propelled the growth of the Movement was the exceptional display of courageous, self-sacrificial good works by Christians caring for their pagan neighbours. During terrible plagues, when unbelievers threw their diseased loved ones onto the streets, followers of Christ came forward to love and care for them. Such brave acts of self-giving love lent credibility to their witness and turned enemies into friends.³⁵ The significance of this is best captured in this statement from Will Durant's classic work: "There is no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians ... fighting the sword with the word, brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has known. Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ had won."³⁶ This was the impact of the power of the Cross in the early formative years of the Jesus Movement that set in motion an unstoppable Kingdom movement of personal, social, and global transformation.

Many illustrations of such Spirit-power in action exist in history – both within and outside the Pentecostal Movement. Mother Teresa's remarkable model of unconditional sacrificial service to the poorest of the poor. Australian missionary Gladys Staines' declaration, "I forgive him," captured newspaper headlines the day after her husband and two sons were brutally murdered by fanatical Hindu militants, triggering a public response: "If that is Christianity, we need it in India!"³⁷ Bombay Teen Challenge (Project Rescue), a ministry devoted to the rescue and restoration of sex-trafficked victims, saw the impregnable walls in Mumbai's red-light district crack open when their workers picked up corpses of AIDS victims thrown on the streets.

Conclusion

Jesus radically redefines Spirit-power in terms of redemptive action: as serving life rather than protecting status, as self-giving, not self-preserving, as the Creator God stooping to serve, changing hearts through love, and transforming the course of history non-coercively. Spirit-power that flows from the self-giving *kenosis* seen in the Incarnation, towel and basin, and the Cross of Christ is thus totally at odds with worldly notions of political power, psychological manipulation, and spiritual magic.

Pentecostals need never let go cherished distinctives of Spirit-power such as vibrant worship, energetic preaching, spiritual gifts, power-encounters, and evangelistic passion. But would that we would press in to embrace much more deeply the heart of the New Testament notion of Spirit-power. For in Christ's upside-down Kingdom, true Spirit-power is the power of love and grace, power

³⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 73-75.

³⁶ Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (Simon & Schuster, 1944), 652.

³⁷ "Forgiveness Heals: Gladys," *Times of India*, September 23, 2003, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/forgiveness-heals-gladys/articleshow/196423.cms>.

manifested in weakness, and self-giving servanthood; it is the power that transforms – the power of the Cross!

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A Response to Ivan Satyavrata's “Empowering the Empty-Handed’: Spirit-Power and the Church-in-Mission”

Joel Tejedo

Years ago, I received an invitation to present a paper at the Australian National University (ANU), where I recounted the serious issue of graft and corruption in the Philippines through telling them a story. For those present in Singapore last May for the Europe–Asia Pentecostal Summit,¹ you may recall my account regarding the four classifications of corruption among religious leaders in Asia. Do you still remember the story about “under the table, over the table, and taking the table, eating the table?” While sharing this narrative with religious scholars at ANU, an Australian professor approached me and mentioned that there exists an Indian version of this tale. He recounted that once, four religious leaders in India were engaged in a discussion about the corruption issues in their respective nations. A Filipino priest expressed, “I feel disheartened whenever Filipino contractors construct bridges in the Philippines: 40% of the funds are allocated to the project, while 60% is siphoned off by the contractor and politicians.” The Indonesian imam responded, “It is even worse in Indonesia. When Indonesian contractors build bridges, only 30% is directed to the project, and 70% is taken by the contractor and politicians.” The Nepalese monk, in a fit of anger, declared, “It is far worse in Nepal. When we construct bridges, a mere 10% is spent on the project, while 90% is appropriated by the contractor and politicians.” The three then turned to the Indian pujari and inquired, “What about the situation here in India?” The Indian pujari replied, “Do you see that river?” “Yes!” the three responded. “No bridge!” the Indian concluded.

In establishing the context of this chapter, it is likely that we all concur that the reasons behind the plight of people in Asia being “empty-handed” stem from graft and corruption. There is a profound connection between poverty and corruption. Those who are empty-handed are individuals with “empty pockets” and “empty stomachs” (in Tagalog: *Walang laman ng bulsa at walang laman ng tiyan*) as a result of excessive taxation and the misappropriation of public funds

¹ See Joel Tejedo, “Megachurches and Public Life: How Megachurch Congregants View Life and Faith,” Global Pentecostal Voices YouTube, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bav6ASxxuM>. See also “Europe-Asia Pentecostal Summit 2025,” Global Pentecostal Voices, May 13-18, 2025, <https://www.gpvoices.org/europe/>.

by a select few. The populace is enduring suffering and hardship due to rampant corruption in our nations. The central thesis of this chapter is to demonstrate that the idea of empowering the impoverished through the influence of the Spirit is not merely an aspect of Pentecostal identity, but rather the core of our discussions and actions as Pentecostal believers in furthering God's mission on earth.

Initially, Ivan Satyavrata defines and links the notion of power to Spirit baptism, which he considers a significant experience for Christians to celebrate. His chapter explores this topic through three critical questions that unpack the biblical basis of Spirit-power, clarify certain distinctions regarding the power of the Holy Spirit and Spirit-power, and contend that Spirit-power is the primary focus of Pentecostals in uplifting the lives of the poor.²

The foundation for an empowered ministry to the poor, as articulated by Satyavrata, is based on the Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus found in Luke 4:18. This manifesto is rooted in the Spirit-prophetic tradition that seeks to liberate various forms of systemic oppression. For Satyavrata, the commencement of Jesus's Spirit-empowered ministry signifies the onset of genuine liberation and the realisation of the Jubilee foretold in the Old Testament. The declaration of Jesus as a charismatic prophet marks the arrival of an anointed Messiah who brings forth good news, healing, wholeness, true peace, and prosperity to the entire world. According to Satyavrata, this Spirit-empowered ministry did not merely begin and end with Jesus's own ministry; rather, he intended to pass on this Spirit-anointed ministry to his church to further his mission on earth. Consequently, Satyavrata posits that Spirit-empowerment is inherently both Christological and ecclesiological in nature.³

Satyavrata also contends that the Gospel of Luke reveals God's preferential option for the poor (*ptōchoi*), who are frequently characterised as economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised, particularly in the cases of widows, orphans, and those exploited by others. This group of disenfranchised individuals, Satyavrata notes, represents the "empty-handed" people portrayed as vulnerable, voiceless, marginalised, and powerless.⁴ Drawing on Bryant Myers' concept,⁵ Satyavrata emphasises that the root cause of poverty is primarily relational and secondarily spiritual. Poverty manifests as a social reality stemming from broken relationships that are dysfunctional, unjust, and misaligned with God, humanity, and nature. It is also spiritual in nature, as injustice arises from sin that distorts our relationships with both God and fellow humans. Building upon the ideas of Myers as well as Jayakumar Christian,⁶ Satyavrata describes the concept of "sin" as a "web of lies" that ensnares the poor within societal structures intentionally designed and ingrained in our

² Ivan Satyavrata, "'Empowering the Empty-Handed': Spirit-Power and the Church-in-Mission," in *Asian Voices Amplified*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum, 2026), 183.

³ Satyavrata, "'Empowering the Empty-Handed'," 184.

⁴ Satyavrata, "'Empowering the Empty-Handed'," 185.

⁵ Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Orbis Books, 2011), 86-87.

⁶ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 86-87. See also, Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power, and the Kingdom of God*, 2nd ed. (Acorn Press, 2011), 168-69.

communities.⁷ These societal structures are reflected in our biophysical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, and even personal systems, all rooted in the “web of lies” that both disempower and distort the identities of the impoverished. Quoting Myers, Satyavrata asserts, “At the end of the day, people are the cause of poverty, and it is people who must change for things to change.”⁸

Struggling to articulate the concept of power, Satyavrata examines its application in both secular and religious contexts. Drawing on definitions from Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Jeffrey Pfeffer, power is described as “a person or actor in a position” who “executes actions through their will, creating a reality via social control” and “shapes and alters events by compelling individuals to act in ways they otherwise would not.”⁹ Satyavrata’s exploration of power reveals its capacity to coerce, reward, legitimise, and elevate individuals to expertise.¹⁰

Advocating for a more refined definition, Satyavrata, in collaboration with Andy Crouch, posits that power is a divine gift, reflecting the image of God, intended for the empowerment and flourishing of life.¹¹ Despite its inherent dark sides stemming from our flawed world, power can be redeemed and restored. Nevertheless, when power is wielded by the wrong individuals, it can become “extremely dangerous, intoxicating, and addictive,” leading to misuse and abuse, particularly among those who pursue wealth, status, and prestige.¹² Satyavrata cautions religious leaders to be responsible stewards of power, emphasising that when secular and religious authorities misuse power for control, engage in inappropriate sexual conduct, mismanage finances, or intimidate through religious means, they risk fracturing the very organisations they are meant to serve.¹³

Focusing on the core purpose of his study, Satyavrata highlights Jesus’s proclamation of his anointed messianic ministry as the Jubilee, marking the beginning of his earthly mission to address the issues plaguing our world by unleashing his power to “set things right” in our sinful and ailing society.¹⁴ According to Satyavrata, the Spirit’s power active in our world today serves as proof that God is dismantling the forces of evil and inviting humanity to reconcile with him. This divine power is actively manifested through the preaching of the good news, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed, and

⁷ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 185.

⁸ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 83, quoted in Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 186.

⁹ See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1922; repr., University of California Press, 1978); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978); Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 1992), as quoted in Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 186.

¹⁰ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 183.

¹¹ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (IVP, 2013), as quoted in Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 187.

¹² Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 188.

¹³ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 190.

¹⁴ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 188.

providing for those in need, among other actions. Such divine intervention acts as a counter-offensive against the evil forces that have “unleashed the great reversal” against the sin that binds the world.¹⁵ Satyavrata poses a challenge to Pentecostals regarding how they should embody and assert this power to further God’s mission, thereby perpetuating this unstoppable Jubilee and missionary movement in our contemporary world. Drawing on insights from Evangelical/Pentecostal theologians such as Amos Yong, Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, Paul Freston, and V. V. Thomas, Satyavrata urges Pentecostals to embody this Spirit-empowerment for social transformation, fostering just communities by employing prophetic gifts to critique societal issues (Yong), responding to humanitarian crises and human needs (Miller and Yamamori), promoting the upward mobility of the impoverished (Freston), and advocating for liberation from all forms of oppression while mobilising the poor (*Dalit*) towards equitable access to spiritual empowerment (Thomas).¹⁶

While Satyavrata recognises the leading role of Pentecostals in promoting God’s mission worldwide, he concurs with Wonsuk Ma’s¹⁷ and Simon Chan’s¹⁸ insights regarding the negative aspects of how some Pentecostal leaders have politicised and commercialised the Spirit. This has involved power control, self-promotion, and the commodification of charismatic gifts, which have ultimately undermined the testimony and witness of the Pentecostal Movement.

Consequently, Satyavrata concludes his study by urging Pentecostals to model their lives after the “three significant moments” in Christ’s life, which serve as paradigms for a Spirit-empowered community of believers, positioning them at the forefront of Christian mission. First, he encourages Pentecostals to reflect the “incarnation of Jesus” as a model of generosity and selfless giving, which involves renouncing wealth and adopting a lower economic identity to connect with the poor.¹⁹ Second, he challenges them to embody the Lord’s Supper as a representation of servant leadership, contrasting it with the triumphalistic mindset often seen among Pentecostals.²⁰ Last, he invites Pentecostals to walk alongside the poor by emulating the Cross, which

¹⁵ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 188.

¹⁶ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005); Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (University of California Press, 2007); Paul Freston, “Evangelicalism and Globalization,” in *A Global Faith: Essays on Evangelicalism and Globalization*, ed. Mark Hutchinson and Ogbu Kalu (Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998); and V. V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism, Spirituality of the Empowered Poor* (Asian Trading Co., 2008), as quoted in Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 188.

¹⁷ Wonsuk Ma, “Tragedy of Spirit-Empowered Heroes: A Close Look at Samson and Saul,” *Spiritus* 2, nos. 1-2 (2017): 23–38.

¹⁸ Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 190.

²⁰ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 191.

exemplifies the power of God that supports and sustains us during our times of suffering, hardship, and weakness.²¹

Until recently, individuals in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines have found it increasingly difficult to endure the hardship and suffering caused by the significant disparity and inequality between the wealthy and the impoverished, largely due to the rampant graft and corruption in their nations. We have witnessed both violent and non-violent expressions of people power, demonstrating that the populace in Asia is now motivated to challenge corrupt governance. For example, on September 21, 2025, various Christian denominations, including Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals, issued a national statement through written communication and social media, urging citizens to take to the streets and participate in the “Trillion Pesos March.”²² This united stance from churches in the Philippines raises several thought-provoking questions for Pentecostals in Asia. How should we thoughtfully engage with and reflect upon the political, social, and economic struggles faced by people in Asia? In what ways can Pentecostals analyse and contemplate the violent and non-violent protests occurring in the region? Are these protests viable alternatives for Pentecostal Christians? How can we connect the influence of the Holy Spirit as a foundation for cultivating and guiding moral leadership within our churches and society? One might question whether Pentecostals are leading the charge in moral leadership within both the religious and political arenas. Is it possible for Pentecostal churches to act as a power broker in holding corrupt political leaders accountable for their actions against the populace? Can the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit-empowerment serve as a mission to combat corrupt politics?

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²¹ Satyavrata, “‘Empowering the Empty-Handed’,” 191.

²² Camile Diola and Jean Mangaluz, “Prayers and Protest: Massive ‘Trillion Peso March’ Crowd Turns up in White on EDSA,” *Philstar Global*, September 21, 2025, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/09/21/2474434/prayers-and-protest-massive-trillion-peso-march-crowd-turns-white-edsa>.

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