

Power Encounter

The term "power encounter" was coined by Fuller missiologist Alan Tippett to label an event commonly experienced by the peoples of the South Pacific as they converted to Christianity. Tippett noted that people usually had come to Christ in large groupings ("People Movement") soon after a major confrontation that tested the power of their ancestral gods against that of the Christian God, resulting in an obvious victory for the latter. These encounters were reminiscent of the scriptural encounters between Moses and Pharaoh (Exod. 7-12) and between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

South Pacific peoples were (and are) keenly aware of the presence, activity, and power of spirits. Their leaders were openly committed to the gods of their islands. They credited these gods with providing protection, food, fertility, and all other necessities of life for them. But they also lived in great fear of their anger and vengeance. To challenge the ancestral gods was unthinkable for most South Pacific peoples. Nevertheless, in turning to Christ, often after years of weighing the consequences, it was chiefs and priests, those who knew the gods and their power best, who chose to challenge them. In doing so, they wagered that the Christian God had greater power than their gods and cast themselves completely on him for protection from the revenge of their gods.

A typical power encounter would involve a priest or chief, speaking on behalf of his people, publicly denouncing their allegiance to their god(s) in the name of Jesus and challenging the god(s) to do something about it. When the god(s) could not respond, the victory belonged to Jesus and large numbers of the people usually converted. As Tippett noted, power-oriented people require power proof, not simply reasoning, if they are to be convinced.

The value and validity of an approach to evangelism that involves power confrontations is widely accepted today in missiological thinking and practice, since it is recognized that most of the peoples of the world are power-oriented. Current theorists, however, have expanded Tippett's original

concept to include healing and deliverance from demons as power encounters. They see Jesus' ministry as including numerous such power encounters. These encounters are usually less spectacular than those Tippetts described but, it is argued, qualify as genuine power encounters since they involve the pitting of the power of God to bring freedom against the power of Satan to keep people in bondage. Furthermore, such "signs and wonders" frequently result in the conversion of families and even larger groups who accept the healing or deliverance as demonstrating the presence and power of God. There is, however, some difference of opinion over whether such encounters should be planned or simply taken advantage of when they occur.

It is important to note that conversion through power encounter does not assure that the movement will be stable and enduring. Throughout the Scriptures we see that people can observe God's mightiest demonstrations of power but soon go right back to the gods who were defeated. Thus it was both after Moses defeated Pharaoh and Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal. So it has been in many of the power events in the South Pacific and elsewhere. As always, the crucial dimension in conversion is what happens after the turning, whether people feed and grow in their new relationship with Jesus Christ or neglect it and let it die.

---Charles Kraft---