

Mennonites and power

Returning to a thwarted conversation

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In 1944, the Mennonite press published Goshen College professor Guy F. Hershberger's *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*. This book defines *biblical nonresistance* and spells out its implications for life in the Mennonite community. Hershberger emphasizes suffering love and noncoercion, rooted in Jesus' command to "Resist not him that is evil."¹ The word *power* is not in the index and rarely appears in Hershberger's work. Where it does appear, it is usually something to be avoided, something needed by governments but not by Christians who follow the way of love.

Although Hershberger criticizes liberal Protestants for underestimating the "power of sin,"² he speaks guardedly of any power that might counter sin—even the power exercised by Jesus himself. In *The Way of the Cross*, published in 1958, Hershberger writes that "although [Jesus] was the divine Son of God, with the

powers of heaven at His command, these powers were used only sparingly, and then only in ministering to the needs of others . . . never . . . to save himself or to withstand his opponents."³

J. Lawrence Burkholder was Hershberger's persistent critic on the issue of power. In the tumultuous years after World War 2, he administered a United Nations relief program in China. In this position of power and responsibility, he came to feel that his Mennonite upbringing had not prepared him for

the moral ambiguities he encountered. He lamented that his Mennonite "innocence" and "good conscience" had been tarnished by "tragic necessity" and said he had learned "the difference between the ethics of personal relations and corporate responsibilities."⁴

Reflection on the issues raised by a frustrated fifty-year-old conversation between Guy F. Hershberger and J. Lawrence Burkholder is vital to the continuing health and witness of the Mennonite Church.

On his return from China, Burkholder joined Hershberger, his former teacher and mentor, on the faculty of Goshen College. He also began study at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he found a climate that welcomed his questions. His doctoral dissertation, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church*, was a direct challenge to Hershberger's views about nonresistance. Burkholder feared that Mennonites were avoiding responsibility for society and history by absolutizing nonresistance, which he claimed had never been intended to apply to the complexities of institutional and political life.⁵

Burkholder's views were not well received in Goshen. In written response to the dissertation, Hershberger acknowledged Burkholder's brilliant work (Burkholder had graduated *summa cum laude*), but was liberal with disapproving comments. In a private conversation initiated by Hershberger, Burkholder felt scolded. When Hershberger ended the conversation by saying something like, "This can't be," Burkholder asked, "Well, shall I leave?" (meaning, Should I leave Goshen College?). Hershberger left the room without responding.⁶

Historian Theron Schlabach reports that during this time the church press sponsored a public conversation on Burkholder's thesis. Burkholder prepared a presentation of his dissertation and Hershberger a critique. For some reason, Hershberger was invited to speak first, and "with only a slight apology for breach of protocol, he put Burkholder's paper under the surgeon's scalpel, refuting and quoting it freely even before Burkholder had delivered it. Burkholder was left to do the best he could."⁷

According to Burkholder's memory of this time, he was silenced. He does not remember whether he submitted his dissertation to the Mennonite press and never heard back,⁸ or whether he did not submit it because of lack of support from colleagues and administration at Goshen.⁹ After these initial conversations, there seemed to be no opening for further consideration of his views: "It was hush-hush for the sake of unity, and I decided I could keep quiet for awhile if I needed to."¹⁰

Burkholder remained at Goshen College for more than ten years and later returned to be its president. But he did not lose his anger and frustration about Mennonites' refusal to acknowledge or deal with power. In "The Limits of Perfection: Autobiographical

Reflections,” Burkholder wrote, “Regarding power, no theoretical provision was made for its use in the Anabaptist-Mennonite lexicon. Everybody knows that power is used, but it was not acknowledged. Mennonites use power while exalting weakness.”¹¹

Years later, when asked about Burkholder’s experience of being silenced, Hershberger said something like, “J. Lawrence? said that? No . . . I never would have kept him from publishing his thesis! . . . I discussed the thesis with Lawrence, but I don’t have any authority to tell people they can’t publish a thesis.”¹²

I believe that reflection on the issues raised by this frustrated conversation between Hershberger and Burkholder is vital to the continuing health and witness of the Mennonite Church. In the

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fifty years since this conversation began, the Mennonite church in the U.S. has moved from fairly heavy-handed power structures (in the 1940s and 1950s), to an idealizing of egalitarianism (in the 1960s and 1970s), to a tendency in the last two decades to romanticize and seek a return to the good old days of leadership and authority. These swings have followed similar swings in U.S. society. The church has continued to be divided or ambivalent about how Christians exercise or influence power in the political realm. My

hope is that reflection on our history and the scriptures can move us forward in this conversation and make us less inclined to reactionary swings in any direction.

What does the Bible say about power?

In a textbook on interpersonal conflict, William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker suggest three ways of understanding power in relationships: distributive, integrative, and designated.

Distributive power is power over. It is an either/or kind of power: when one person has more, another has less.¹³ This characteristic of power was assumed by German sociologist Max Weber in a definition that has become classic in the West: “We understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating [acted upon] in the action.”¹⁴ Hocker

and Wilmot suggest that this view of either/or power predominates and is usually assumed in our culture, whether in the context of interpersonal or international relations.¹⁵

Integrative power is both/and power. The assumption is that all parties in a relationship have and use power currencies of various types, and that power may actually be increased when it is shared.¹⁶ Hocker and Wilmot suggest that this understanding of power is more common among women, and perhaps in cultures such as Japan, where conflict style tends to be less confrontational and more likely to build on mutual strengths.¹⁷

Designated power is Hocker and Wilmot's third way of understanding power relationships. They suggest that an individual often chooses to invest power in a relationship with another person, a family, workplace, or other institution. By designating power to a larger entity, one receives personal benefit or participates in a larger good. In some sense, designated power is an account that can be drawn on when individual power is perceived as insufficient. Someone who has designated power to another person or institution has not given their power away, because one always retains the option of rescinding one's designated power.¹⁸

The Bible speaks often of power, both divine and human, and usually does so in a positive rather than a negative light. The power of God liberates slaves from Egypt and provides for them in the wilderness; the power of the Holy Spirit brings miraculous understanding and unprecedented sharing at Pentecost. Power is also a human trait. The word used most often for power in the Hebrew Bible refers to human armies as well as to God's power in the Exodus, to the human capacity for economic production as well as to God's power to create and sustain life. One of the most frequent references to power in the New Testament is to Jesus' "works of power"; in Matthew 10 and Luke 9, Jesus explicitly passes these powers on to his disciples.¹⁹

The Hebrew scriptures warn repeatedly that the human power to sustain life (economic power) and to protect life (military power) must be relativized by dependence on the power of God. As the psalmist says, "A king is not saved by his great army [a word translated elsewhere as "power"]; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength [also translated elsewhere as "power"]. . . . Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who

hope in his steadfast love to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine” (Ps. 33:16, 18). Moses instructs the people, “[When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you,] Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:17-18).

In the passages where Jesus explicitly passes power on to his disciples, he too warns them not to rely on their own economic or military power but to depend for their provision and protection on God:²⁰ “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you

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enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them” (Luke 9:3-5).

Paradoxically, those who recognize their weakness and depend on God are promised power. The judge Gideon protests that he is the weakest in his clan, but he is commissioned by God as a powerful warrior with the promise, “I will be with you” (Judg. 6:12-16). In the New Testament, this paradox brings to mind God’s words to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you. For power is made perfect

in weakness,” to which Paul responds, “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor. 12:9). But the central demonstration of this paradox of human weakness and God’s power is the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Before Jesus’ ministry begins, he faces temptations that focus on how he will choose to use power. Jesus rejects the temptation to mass-produce bread for the hungry (economic power). He rejects the temptation to accept the ultimate claims of empire (political power). He rejects the temptation to prove his legitimacy by miraculous demonstrations in the temple (religious power). Jesus goes on to undermine the power of world markets by giving thanks for God’s provision of five loaves and two fish. He undermines the power of armies and empire by living freely in

the face of their death threats, trusting God's protection. He undermines the power of the temple by inviting all to experience forgiveness and communion with God. Finally, Jesus exposes the lie of these powers by willingly facing death at their hand, and God's power as ultimate provider and protector is gloriously displayed in the resurrection.

So, what is power as understood by the biblical writers? I suggest that it is the God-given capacity for life, and the power to sustain that life through economic production and some kind of protection and security. Human institutions (families, markets, churches, communities, governments) are part of God's plan to give humans the power needed for sustaining and securing human life.

But throughout the Bible, a struggle surfaces when human institutions (and the spiritual powers they embody) try to take over the place of God. In fact, these institutions and powers take on the aspect of evil when—in their pretensions to be the ultimate source of provision and security—they destroy what they purport to create. I understand the Bible to say that the power for life and shalom (provision and protection) comes only from God. All other powers are pretenders when they claim to have the power to protect us and provide for us.

Using the language of Hocker and Wilmot: (1) The biblical story is an attempt to persuade God's people to designate their power to God rather than to humans or human institutions. (2) The biblical paradox of weakness and strength means that when human power is designated to God, the result is increased rather than diminished power for humans; in other words, God's power is integrative rather than distributive. (3) The Bible warns against distributive understandings and uses of power, and it gives hints for organizing institutions in ways that are consistent with God's integrative power, where power increases as it is shared between the least and the greatest.²¹

Reclaiming our power

What does it mean to designate power to God? John Howard Yoder suggests that the church since World War 2 has too often let itself believe that the real power for change in the world lies with the armies and the markets.²² We so assume the necessity of

protection and provision by armies and markets that we designate our power to them before we even realize that it is ours to give away. Walter Wink graphically suggests that the gesture of obeisance to the powers is a shrug: I did what I had to do. What choice did I have? I was obeying orders. I don't enjoy the violence in these films, but it is what the public wants.²³ When we fail to recognize our power to choose, we designate power not to God but to whatever powers happen to be at hand.

I believe that Burkholder fell into this trap when he accepted the "tragic necessities" of working in a powerful institution:²⁴ "There were times when my staff and I were required to accept military escort. This bothered me, but I had to go along with it."²⁵ "I sometimes felt sad and guilty even though one could do nothing about it. One could bend policy only so far and get away with

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it."²⁶ "A U.N. administrator could question policies, but s/he had to function within them until they were revised or rescinded."²⁷

Choosing to designate power to God (and thereby removing our investment from another person or institution) may be costly. It may involve speaking the truth in a situation where we have a lot to lose: our safe spot in an unjust system, a spouse, a job, our church standing. It will often make other

people uncomfortable or angry.²⁸ It will mean placing our trust in God's power and the resources God has made available. These choices are complex and never either/or. They demand thoughtful consideration over time and in the company of others committed to the way of Jesus. But we must begin by recognizing and claiming our power: we do have choices to make, choices for life, choices for death.

If it is important to remember that we have the option of taking back power that we have designated to others, it is equally important to recognize and be responsible stewards of the power that others have designated to us. Here I would challenge Hershberger. He believed, as I do, in the "way of the cross" as a model for human relations. But instead of acknowledging the power he carried as Burkholder's senior colleague and shaper of Mennonite thought, his theology made him unaware of his own

power. When he used his position and influence to undermine and silence Burkholder, he didn't see what he was doing.

Neither Burkholder nor Hershberger grew up in a time or a culture that gave them tools for this kind of interpersonal analysis and reflection. Burkholder's formative experiences at least pushed him to ask the questions. As North American Mennonites, we are growing increasingly powerful. All of us are recipients of designated power because of our country of birth, and many of us because of skin color, gender, role in an institution, education, or personal charisma, among others. All of us must face the challenge of acknowledging the power we have and deciding on faithful ways to designate that power to God and God's purposes.

Those calling for a return to leadership and authority in the church are correct in asking for clear recognition of individual and institutional power, and for affirming the calling we each have to exercise that power for good in the church and the world. "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). If we are

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part of the biblical story, however, the choices we make about that power will fly in the face of our cultural training and assumptions. They may also look very different, depending on where we stand. Regina Shands Stoltzfus contrasts the rich young man, who was confronted with the power of his wealth, and the marginalized woman with hemorrhages. Both recognized their power: one needed to walk away to reflect; one needed to find the courage to speak.²⁹ We must work together to reclaim our power of choice in situations that

tempt us to feel powerless, and to make choices for God's integrative power when we are powerful. For God's is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Amen.

Notes

¹ Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944), 203.

² *Ibid.*, 209.

³ Guy F. Hershberger, *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1958), 23.

⁴ Quoted in Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994), 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶ Theron F. Schlabach, “Guy F. Hershberger vis-à-vis J. Lawrence Burkholder: Irreconcilable Approaches to Christian Ethics?” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (January 1999): 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Burkholder’s dissertation was published by Institute for Mennonite Studies in 1989, thirty-one years after it was written.

⁹ Schlabach, “Guy F. Hershberger vis-à-vis J. Lawrence Burkholder,” 28.

¹⁰ Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 94.

¹¹ In *Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, Ont.: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 37.

¹² Schlabach, “Guy F. Hershberger vis-à-vis J. Lawrence Burkholder,” 26.

¹³ William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 96.

¹⁴ *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 180; quoted in Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop, eds., *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 175.

¹⁵ Wilmot and Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁹ These conclusions based on my own word searches of the Hebrew, Greek, and New Revised Standard Version Bible using Bible Windows 4.05 (Silver Mountain Software, 1995) are corroborated by James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

²⁰ I was first introduced to the twin themes of provision and protection in Alan Kreider’s book *Journey Towards Holiness: A Way of Living for God’s Nation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987). Kreider gives a convincing overview of the centrality of God’s protection and provision throughout the biblical story. I was fascinated to find these themes so closely linked to the biblical concept of power.

²¹ Examples include Jubilee debt relief, direct address, and the church as a body with Jesus as the head.

²² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 156.

²³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 99.

²⁴ Sawatsky and Holland, *Limits of Perfection*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ Although we sometimes mistakenly confuse the two, trying to control the behavior of a person or institution by threat or force is different from making a choice about our investment in that person or institution that results in their anger or discomfort.

²⁹ See her sermon, “Mother, may I?” in this issue.

About the author

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