Resurrection
The nonviolent politics of God

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Power is at the center of who we are as a church, a nation, and a global humanity. Our perceptions of power—what it is and how it functions—shape how we structure institutions and organize work, how we train leaders, and how they exercise authority. Our understanding of power also molds the ethos of our communities and the personalities of their members.

What, then, is the nature of power? Mennonite views of power have tended to be dualistic: power is nonviolence for the specially called, and it is coercion and violence for those who run the state. But power—whether ecclesial, national, or transnational; whether personal, vocational, or institutional—is ultimately of one nature and essence. It is not both violence and nonviolence.

My aim is to challenge our belief that those who hold weapons of violence are "in power" and to commend the practice of the politics of nonviolence in church and world, on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus.

How would our understanding of the church, its structures, and its leadership be altered if our most fundamental understanding of power were all-encompassing nonviolence? How could our understanding of the resurrection—the central tenet of Christian faith—inform our individual and collective perception of power?

This article is structured around four theses: (1) Violence as a political instrument is a dead-end pursuit. (2) Power is nonviolence;[1] to speak of nonviolent power is redundant.[2] (3) The resurrection of Jesus is a historical epiphany of nonviolence countering the politics of empire. (4) The church and its leadership must reclaim authentic power (i.e., nonviolence) if we would be representatives of the Jesus way in our present empire.[3]

These theses are too sweeping to defend in the scope of this brief essay. My aim is more modest: to challenge our predisposi-

tion to believe that those who hold weapons of violence are "in power," and to commend the practice of the politics of nonviolence in both church and world, on the basis of the early church's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus.

Violence as a political instrument is a dead-end pursuit. Jonathan Schell notes that "in a steadily and irreversibly widening sphere, violence, always a mark of human failure and the bringer of sorrow, has now also become dysfunctional as a political instrument. Increasingly it destroys the ends for which it is employed, killing the user as well as the victim. It has become the path to hell on earth and the end of the earth."[4] Pursuing domination through the instrumentality of violence will lead to the destruction of the human species and our host, planet earth. This outcome is the definitive evidence that violence is not power but the loss of power, not courage but the demonstration of fear, not the expression of strength but of human desperation and weakness. As Hannah Arendt notes, "Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent."[5]

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In its war on Iraq, the United States holds the military capacity to defeat a nation, maim its people, and destroy its infrastructure. But that strategy has stripped us of the power to win Iraq's people over and to build a nation. In Arendt's words, "Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it."[6] This statement may evoke disbelief in those who assume that violence is power and that systemic, sustained, legalized, state-sponsored violence—war—is the ultimate form of power.

Yet the prospect of nuclear annihilation has led many who had believed in the necessity of war to the commonsense conclusion that war in the twenty-first century is obsolete. Having traced the rise and fall of the war system, Jonathan Schell concludes that "never has a single technical invention had a more sudden or profound effect on an entrenched human institution than nuclear weapons have had on war. . . . The logic of total war had carried its practitioners to the brink of a destination, the far side of human existence, to which the logic of politics could not follow.

For politics was a human activity, and in the post-nuclear landscape there might be no human beings."[7]

War is better understood as religion than as a science; it requires a political momentum that is sustained by an ethos of fear and ethnocentrism rather than by the logic of analysis. Its religious character is evident in rituals, strict codes of group behavior and identity, a threatening enemy that constitutes the reality against which the group's identity is formed, a belief in a transcendent power or cause, and an ethos that clothes these conceptions with an aura of facticity.[8] "The conviction that force was always the final arbiter was not in truth so much an intellectual conclusion as a tacit assumption on all sides—the product not of a question asked and answered but of one unasked."[9] Those who can free their minds of the myth of constructive violence will conclude with Jacques Ellul that "violence begets violence—nothing else."[10]

Whether it is implemented by the state or supported through the religious practices and theological systems of the church, violence destroys what it claims to preserve. Yet even the pacifist church has borrowed from the empire much of its logic, many of its patterns of thought and theological assumptions. The church, like the world (the peoples and powers that have not submitted themselves to a nonviolent God and the way of Jesus), takes for granted that violence is power. It is the coercion that some people must exercise if society is to have peace and Christians are to have freedom of worship. Citing Romans 13:1-7, many Christian pacifists assume that worldly leaders (politicians) know best how to run the world, that some Christians have a special calling to follow Jesus, and that non-Christians and Christians who do not have this special calling have been given authority to exercise violence.[11]

This wisdom leads peace-loving Christians to presume that as we move into positions of leadership in society, we will need to become more responsibly engaged in the rhetoric and the practice of warfare. Augustine made this assumption in constructing what we now call just war theory. Reinhold Niebuhr shared this outlook as he developed his political theology of responsibility. Significant numbers of Mennonite leaders today, those who are pro-Niebuhr and those who are anti-Niebuhr, struggle with this point of view. For some, the code words are *ambiguity*, *compromise*, and *responsi-*

bility. For those with a more traditional *Stillen im Lande* stance, the code words are *separation* and *withdrawal*. Both groups assume—unlike Jesus—that God wills that some people exercise violence some of the time.

Nonviolence is power.

If the twentieth century demonstrated the failure of violence, movements in that century have also demonstrated persuasively that there is a political force more powerful: nonviolence. Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela come quickly to mind, but dozens of other people and movements have also established the successes of nonviolence.[12] But despite the successes of nonviolence and the conspicuously dismal failures of violence, our culture continues to accept as true the myth that violence is the midwife that will deliver a peaceful and orderly society.

Peace church theology, like the cultural worldview that leads us to believe that violence is power and therefore a societal necessity, is riddled with anomalies and contradictions.[13] We are called to hold to the simple claim that to be a follower of Jesus is to take up our cross in our day in our empire—the United States and its allies—even as Jesus took up his cross in the empire of his day. As *The Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder's seminal contribution to biblical studies, expresses it, "Only at one point, only on one subject—but then consistently, universally—is Jesus our example: in his cross."[14]

Were we to adhere to this conviction, we would eliminate the double-talk in much contemporary Mennonite theology. We would reject the assertion that God "paradoxically" calls some Christians to be violent so that others may be nonviolent. This dualistic theology is doubly dangerous: it legitimates our society's violence (including its wars), and every theology that legitimates violence turns to stab those who underwrite it. Consoled beneath this theology's sacred shroud, we are oblivious to the violence to which we cling.

Gandhi noted that violence has many forms; he claimed that passivity is a greater evil than overt violence. As North American Mennonites move from the passivity and withdrawal characteristic of our agrarian background, we are increasingly caught up in the

covert structural violence that is supported by the theology emerging out of our cultural milieu. But the God of Jesus does not now need violence, in any form, nor has God ever needed violence to protect the nonviolent way of life Jesus taught and practiced.

Despite all theological arguments for its political necessity, violence has failed the church even as it has failed the world. Jesus understood the way of nonviolence to be in the design of the universe, to be life-giving power. The nonviolent way of Jesus represents the character of the new world, the reign of God that is coming now but awaits the fuller realization which has been anticipated in the resurrection of Jesus.

In Jesus' resurrection, nonviolent power counters the politics of empire.

We not only have a body of political science that supports the thesis that power is nonviolence, we also have a biblical heritage and parts of an Anabaptist theology that undergird this conviction. What Schell demonstrates historically and Arendt argues philosophically, the early church through the Gospel writers and Paul states in "narrative theology" by describing the Jesus event that culminates in the resurrection and exaltation. For the early church, the resurrection account is the theological narrative that substantiates the political viability of nonviolence.

The resurrection affords us a glimpse of the nonviolent power[15] of God and the universe that is ordinarily obscured by the pervasive myth of redemptive violence. We need a theology that views Jesus' resurrection and exaltation as epiphany, as proleptic manifestation of the power of the universe.

Resurrection for the first Christian believers was the defeat of violence through exposing its illusory and deceptive character. As Richard Hays has aptly written, "Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross. Those who follow him can hardly expect better treatment from the world. Insofar as the community of faith follows the path of the Jesus of history, it should expect suffering as its lot."[16] Resurrection, then, was the triumph of nonviolence, of God's life-giving power to those and for those who had followed Jesus to the cross.

We gain a better understanding of what resurrection meant for those early followers of Jesus from Philippians 2, the Bible's semi-

nal christological passage for those who claim an Anabaptist heritage. Paul speaks not of Jesus' death and resurrection but of his death and exaltation. As N. T. Wright notes, Paul does so with the clear assumption that Jesus was raised from the dead. Why then, asks Wright, did Paul use the language of exaltation?[17] He suggests that Paul "was consciously modelling the poem and its portrait of Jesus, not simply on Adam and Israel . . . but also on Caesar (or rather perhaps on the whole tradition of arrogant emperors going back at least to Alexander the Great, with the Roman emperors as the current embodiment of the type). Jesus . . . is the reality of which Caesar is the parody."[18]

"The poem," continues Wright, "follows quite closely the narrative sequence of imperial propaganda, and thereby stresses the point for which Paul of Acts was accused: of saying that there is 'another king named Jesus.' He, not Caesar, is the world's true lord."[19] Jesus is Lord and Savior. And by direct implication, Caesar is not. This is more than a creedal or dogmatic declaration. It is a claim based on the kind of life Jesus lived, which is the very reason for Jesus' exaltation. Unlike Caesar, Jesus did not use violence to defend either his status or an empire.

The resurrection was a political event of revolutionary magnitude. But we have tamed this passage and the Gospel accounts of the resurrection by spiritualizing them. The church's theology has brought the resurrection narratives under control by stripping them of their political import, by unlinking them from Jesus' life. These passages may now be used in insipid sermons, which cite these scriptures while failing to grasp their revolutionary significance—a failure so momentous that the effect is to deny the resurrection!

A dramatic shift in the understanding of power was within the purview of the earliest followers of Jesus, including Paul. But the prophetic understanding of power, and of economics,[20] failed to be sustained as the core of the message. Resurrection took on sacral or magical meaning, and by the end of the fourth century, its original meaning as the failure of violence (the crucifixion), and divine validation for the power of the Jesus event, had been structured out of "Christian" existence.[21]

The Jesus event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—had barely been registered on the map of history, much less fully

grasped by those who knew of Jesus, when it was packaged in the theological framework of the day. That repackaging continued not simply and not primarily through the experiences of the prophetic and the early apostolic community but largely through the intelligentsia who mirrored the wisdom of the pagans more than the carpenter of Nazareth. Early on, they became more concerned that the "faith" of the Messiah be communicated in respectable, nonrevolutionary terms than that the daily life of its adherents be transformed by it.

Sacralized as a miracle story, the resurrection narrative could be shared and the event celebrated. But what adherents believed was not the politics of nonviolence in the midst of empire. To outsiders, the resurrection was a nonthreatening fable; to church leaders, it was a creedal statement to be repeated by bishop and emperor alike. The resurrection was something Christians believed in; no longer was it an event demonstrating the revolutionary nonviolent power of the reign of God.

The church and its leadership must reclaim the power of nonviolence in order to represent the Jesus way in our present empire.

That God's power is nonviolence may feel wildly out of sync with our everyday reality. Yet we should be psychologically and spiritually attuned to this alternative worldview, if our perceptions have been transformed by our Anabaptist heritage. Mennonites and other pacifist communities should be prepared culturally and politically to embrace this reality, to be the harbingers of nonviolence in a world dominated by the fear of violence.[22]

The resurrection, although theoretically indispensable to salvation, has not served as theological bedrock for the practice of nonviolence. In much Mennonite theology, salvation and ethics, being and doing, have been presented as sequential—not as warp and woof of a single fabric. Our traditional theologies contain explicit or implicit dualisms regarding violence: the violence of a God of justice versus the nonviolence of Jesus the Son of God, the end-times violence that initiates the kingdom of God versus the nonviolence of the kingdom, the violence of the state ordained by God versus the nonviolence of those called to follow the way of Jesus, the covert violence required to carry out the job

to which God has called me versus the nonviolence of my life in family and fellowship, the necessary violence of the atoning death of Jesus versus the nonviolence of the atoned one. Each of these dualistic theologies constitutes a denial of the resurrection of Jesus. They not only leave room for violence but draw violence into the arena of God's work.[23]

We may respond by saying that the world will not accept resurrection leadership. But we need to start by asking, Will the church? Will the Mennonite Church embrace resurrection nonviolence? How would our church be transformed if the Jesus event, climaxing in the vindication of nonviolence, constituted the power in our day-to-day vocations? With what new authority would we speak, if as leaders and as a people we embodied this power? How would the theology in our seminaries change if "power is nonviolence" became self-evident to us? How would leadership structures be altered if we lived as Jesus did and anticipated the real possibility of dying as Jesus did? Can the church trust its future to the God of nonviolent power?

Our traditional theologies contain dualisms regarding violence that constitute a denial of Jesus' resurrection. They draw violence into the arena of God's work.

I pray for the day when the church will reject evil by saying No to violence—both political and theological. I long for a day when we as a people among the nations will perceive that power is, and always has been, nonviolent. I look for a day when the church, living in the power of the resurrection, will be characterized by the nonviolent politics of God, as the resurrected Jesus promised those who stood in the shadow of the cross (Matt. 28:19-20).

Notes

[1] By *nonviolence* I mean the power of action without violence, cooperation rather than coercion, akin to Gandhi's *satyagraha* ("truth force"). The term *nonviolence*, which seeks to express a positive concept by stating what it is not, reflects the poverty of language (see Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003], 350–51).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969, 1970), 56.

[3] *Empire* here refers to a dominating authority, mythically conceived as sovereign, whose officials are widely presumed to represent a worthy transcendent power. This authority dictates the thought and action of large groups, thereby enhancing the interests of a few to the detriment of many. Politically, the early church and the church of today, particularly within the U.S., share a common political phenomenon: both exist in the midst of empire.

[4] Schell, *The Unconquerable World*, 7.
[5] Arendt, *On Violence*, 56.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Schell, *The Unconquerable World*, 46.
[8] For a more complete description of characteristics of religion, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90–91.
[9] Schell, *The Unconquerable World*, 105.
[10] *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 100.
[11] For a reading of the later Paul that supports a more thoroughgoing pacifist position than that reflected in Romans, see Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2001).
[12] See Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). A set of documentary films (with the same title) accompanies this unusually insightful account.
[13] For my use of *worldview*, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), especially chapters 5–8.
[14] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 95. This theme is repeated throughout *The Politics of Jesus* (see, e.g., 52–53).
[15] Although I agree with Arendt's statement that "nonviolent power is a redundancy" (*On Violence*, 56), as a bridge in communicating I at times use *nonviolence* and *nonviolent power* as synonyms for what Arendt calls *power*.
[16] *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 167.
[17] N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God,* vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 225.
[18] Ibid., 228.
[19] Ibid.
[20] See Acts 2:46-47; 4:32.
[21] Robert Doran's *Birth of a Worldview: Early Christianity in Its Jewish and Pagan Context* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999) includes a helpful chapter on "the source of power" (85–114). Doran discusses the realm of the divine and the various trinitarian and christological formulations leading up to Chalcedon in 451. The discussion differentiates power along the lines of the divine/human, the spiritual/material, and the temporal/eternal. But his treatment only alludes to whether power (and hence the nature of the divine) is coercive or persuasive, determined or free, destructive or life-giving.
[22] See also my essay, "Reimaging Power: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence," in *Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible: Essays in Honor of Millard Lind*, ed. Ted Grimsrud and Loren L. Johns (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, U.S., 1999), 192–216.
[23] For a schema of dualisms found in Mennonite theologies, see appendix 2 in "Resurrection: God's Nonviolence Made Known," an unpublished paper presented at "Teaching Peace Conference: Nonviolence and the Liberal Arts Curriculum," Bluffton College, 26–28 May 2004.

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