Book review

Keith Harder

Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition, edited by Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

It took me a long time to recognize and accept that to be a pastor is to be in a position of power. I suspect that my experience is not unique. I still encounter pastors who deny their power—perhaps because of an ideological commitment to servant leadership that would seem to preclude power, perhaps because of the ways we've all seen power abused, or perhaps because of a simple lack of awareness. But more and more I find pastors and others talking openly about the power and authority that inheres in position and education. We are realizing that sometimes a denial of power actually leads more swiftly (and perhaps soundlessly) to its abuse, and we as pastors are exploring how to be accountable with power and how to use it constructively.

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Part of what contributed to this openness about power and authority inherent in the role and position of the pastor was a recovery of the concept of office of ministry. In 1991, Jackson Carroll developed this theme in *As One With Authority*. In Mennonite circles, the concept of ministerial office began to take root again and was given official sanction with the writing and adoption of *A Mennonite Polity of Ministerial Leadership* in 1995.

A number of Mennonite scholars and leaders helped pave the way for changes in our view of power, authority, and ministerial leadership. From his position in the former General Conference Ministerial Leadership Office, John Esau challenged a purely

functionalist view of ministry and led an effort to reclaim the notion of office, in a collection of essays he edited on *Understanding Ministerial Leadership*. From their vantage point as college presidents, Rodney Sawatsky and Lawrence Burkholder challenged the church to face up to and embrace the power that is embedded in leadership and institutions. Additionally, seminary president Marlin Miller debunked the twentieth-century Mennonite misreading of the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers, used by some to minimize ministerial leadership. Calvin Redekop, speaking as an academic and as one with active ties with the business community, insisted that the denial of power is dangerous and foolish.

Now in his retirement, Redekop and his son Benjamin have revisited this topic in *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, a collection of ten varied and provocative essays. The Redekops believe that for too long Mennonites have avoided the often messy and ambiguous issues surrounding power, especially the exercise of power in the life of the church. The writers in this volume examine these issues from a variety of perspectives. The book includes erudite philosophy, accounts of abusive power, theories of why it has been so hard for Mennonites to look at power in the church, feminist critique of power in Mennonite ecclesiology, and warnings about the consequences of avoiding facing power dynamics in the church.

In the introduction, the editors suggest that one reason Anabaptist-Mennonites have been ambivalent and naïve about power is that their rejection of the state's power to regulate the church led them to assume that they were done with power, even in managing their own affairs. "The restricted focus on the nonresistant position has led to an evasion of full consideration of the centrality of power and its misuse in all human affairs" (xii). This evasion has meant that the power endemic in human affairs has not been acknowledged and held accountable, a dynamic that has opened the door to the abuse of power. The editors say that this book is their attempt to put this "paradox of Anabaptism and power" in focus.

The book begins with an essay by J. Lawrence Burkholder, former president of Goshen College. Burkholder chides the church for its naïveté regarding power and encourages Menno-

nites to more forthrightly and honestly acknowledge and use power for positive ends.

In an essay on "Power and Religion in the Western Intellectual Tradition," Benjamin Redekop takes an instructive tour of the intellectual landscape on the idea of power. While maintaining that the "critique of the abuse of religious, priestly power has been a defining feature of modern theories of power, and the Protestant Reformation (with its radical Anabaptist wing) . . . ," he calls Mennonites to "re-moralize" their exercise of power (49).

In a review of this book in the *Canadian Mennonite* (9 September 2002), Rodney Sawatsky wonders why Redekop highlights the abuse of pastoral power. Sawatsky wryly contends that "at least within the largest Mennonite denomination in North America today, the problem of pastoral power is more in its absence than its abuse." Sawatsky wishes for a less ambivalent embrace of power than he finds in this volume. In his view, Mennonites need to make the transition "from demoralization to remoralization, from abuse to accountability, and from demonization to the legitimation of power and authority" (10).

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In the closing essay, Cal Redekop concludes with a call to embrace power and authority that is "pro-humana," which he defines as authority that "maximizes the subjective and social worth of each person" (177). To ensure that power is used to this end, Redekop insists on clear accountability and structural limitations. Interestingly, this concern for accountability is a prominent feature of the aforementioned *A Mennonite Polity of Ministerial Leadership*, which unfortunately is not recognized in this book.

While many pastors are better able to acknowledge the power that goes with their position, role, and education, and may be more comfortable in using that power for pro-humana ends, there are also reasons for caution. For one, we will find it hard to agree on what is pro-humana and what it means to use power to that end. Depending on our social location, the exercise of power may look different, even if it has pro-humana intentions.

Reflecting this concern are several cautionary voices in this collection, most notably the essay by Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Linda Nyce. While acknowledging "that power is inherent in all social relationships," they reject the practice of ordination and the *Macht* (power over) it seems to give those in ministerial offices. They would rather have us find ways to implement *Kraft* (power to) in our church practices. A chapter by Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb describes the abuse of authority by Mennonite church leaders in South Russia in the nineteenth century. Joel Hartman describes what most people would call the abuse of ministerial authority in a community of "plain" Mennonites. These essays show us how easy it is for those who embrace the power of their office to misuse their power. While it may be true that acknowledged power will more likely be held accountable, accountability does not come easily or naturally for most of us. Self-delusion is never far away.

We also do well to recognize that setting the terms for how we talk about power and how we decide how it may be used are potentially loaded with prejudice born of privilege and status. In other words, we need to be mindful about who is participating in this discussion. Of note is that all of the authors in this book are highly educated Anglos. Finally, it is one thing to come to the point where one can openly acknowledge the power inherent in one's position and role; it is quite another to say that we should then seek to maximize the use of that power, even if it is toward pro-humana ends.

These concerns should not detract from the primary message of this book. We owe Calvin and Benjamin Redekop our gratitude for a helpful contribution to the discussion about power and authority in the life of the church.

About the reviewer

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