

Where two or three are gathered

Power in Christian community

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A CEO sits in his office on the top floor of a high rise on Bay Street in Toronto. He went to the best schools, earns a six-figure income, owns a luxury home. By most standards, he has it made. He epitomises what it means to have power in our culture. Yet he feels powerless, victimised by bureaucratic structures that keep him in his place. At the same time, he fears the loss of his position: shifts in the global economy beyond his control could lead to a sudden downturn in corporate profits and his abrupt ouster.

On the sidewalk below his office is a motley group of activists who are protesting the business practices of multinational corporations with offices in the building. Some of the protesters live in poverty, and others are their advocates. Seen from the executive

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suite high above, they look miniscule, yet as they demonstrate in front of the building entrance, chanting and carrying their signs, they have a sense of power.

When we speak of power, what do we mean? British philosopher Bertrand Russell noted that power is a slippery concept. Generally, we associate it with the ability to get what we want, whether through physical force, military strength, or influence associated with particular positions and roles.

Power so conceived has a competitive aspect; we envision vying for it as if it were a limited—even scarce—resource. We also think of power as seductive and potentially corrupting. We assume that having some often leads to craving more. Seldom do people or nations believe they have enough power.

Our customary association of power with competition, violence, and corruption makes it difficult for Christians to see power positively. And our negative conceptions of power have not led

us to constructive theological thought or practice of power in the church. More recently, philosophers have been considering new ways of thinking about power that are consistent with our scriptures and that may help us think more creatively about power and help us use it more constructively in Christian community.¹

A brief history of power

The classical notion of power connected it to position in a hierarchy. According to this understanding, the amount of power you have depends on where you are in the hierarchy in question: a king has more power than a prince, who has more power than a duke, who has much more power than a peasant. This view of power is exemplified in our scriptures. King David, for example, believed his position entitled him to take whatever he desired, including his neighbour's wife. Many structures of government, business, and the church perpetuate classical hierarchical structures and understandings of power. In the Mennonite church, discussions about ordination often reflect the hierarchical structures that have been part of our tradition, even as they reveal some of our discomfort with those patterns.

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intimately connected with reason and the acquisition of knowledge. Knowing began to dominate other ways of participating in reality, such as feeling or believing. According to the wisdom of modernity, knowledge is power, and increased knowledge leads to increased control. Using science, people could begin to predict and control their environment. Greater control, it was assumed, would lead to greater freedom.

Central to power, in this view, is freedom of choice, which depends on reason, knowledge, and being in control. Strangely, a century that linked power with rationality and control saw massive outbreaks of irrationality—including genocide and the development of weapons of mass destruction.

Like the classical view, this concept of power also persists. The variety in our supermarkets and department stores testifies to our preoccupation with freedom of choice. Our culture emphasises being in control and fears unpredictability, and we regard as

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threatening anything outside our control, including strangers, people with mental illness, the unknown, mystery. The idea of power as control militates against the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, which always involve risk and unknowing.

Postmodern thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Michael Foucault have questioned the adequacy of notions of power based on position or knowledge and control.

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not so much a thing possessed by the individual as a kind of energy that characterises a group. For Foucault, if power is an energy, it exists only in relationship. Imagine a circle of people bound together by a web of string, moving back and forth across the circle, connecting each person in the circle. Power is like the web that binds people together. Rather than being an individual's possession, it exists as a network of relationships, like the web of string. Violent action can destroy the network and result in the alienation and subsequent powerlessness of persons. If someone in the circle lets go of her part of the string, the web is destroyed. Similarly, when people or groups are alienated, they experience powerlessness. This understanding of power explains—in a way that older understandings of power cannot—the CEO's experience of powerlessness and the protesters' sense of power.

Consider another example. A woman has recently been separated from her husband, who has announced that he is gay. Her world is reeling; everything she thought was trustworthy has turned out to be a lie, and her sense of betrayal is profound. She feels utterly alone and powerless to stop the apparently inevitable break-up of her marriage. She wonders when she should remove her wedding ring. She recalls that it was placed on her finger in a wedding ceremony in the context of Christian community. The pastor of her church suggests that she also remove the ring in the context of community, and she agrees. Members of her congrega-

tion gather around her in a service of worship. They sing, read scripture, and pray together. Then she kneels in the centre of the group and removes the ring. Tears, silence, and more prayers follow. She places a new ring on her hand, a ring with a playful design that she has bought to remind herself of new beginnings, of hope and new life. She rises from the centre and joins the others around the circle. Her loneliness, despair, and powerlessness give way to a sense of empowerment, strength, and readiness to move on with her life. Her community has reminded her of her identity as a child of God and a member of the Christian community. The story of the Christian faith embodied by her community surrounds her, and she is able to move forward from her loss.

Biblical perspectives

As Christians, this postmodern view of power offers us a more relational way to think about power. Although I have labelled as postmodern this perspective on power, in many ways it is not a new way of thinking about power. We find this understanding of power throughout our scriptures. For example, Matthew 18:15-20 outlines a way of dealing with brokenness in the community of faith. In this text, Jesus characterises the community as a family and instructs his followers that when people in the faith community confront each other, they do so not as a prosecutor would prosecute an offence but as sisters and brothers seeking whole relationships with each member of the family. After describing the various steps to be used in resolving conflict, he addresses the question of the church's authority. What gives the church its authority to act in the way described? According to verse 18, the power to bind and loose is bestowed by Jesus on the community of believers. Furthermore, when the community gathers in Christ's name, seeks his will, and reaches consensus, Jesus is present among them, guiding their deliberations and empowering them to act: "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is the presence of God in the gathered community.

This passage helps us understand how God's power is mediated in community. It also reminds us that not only are God and grace and forgiveness found in the relationships of Christian community

but that sin also resides there. As power for good is a corporate reality, so sin is not merely personal but affects all in its range. Those who work with abuse know how that sin infiltrates the lives of the family and the church, and extends to future generations in what we label “cycles of violence.” Abuse is never just between husband and wife or parent and child; its effects run throughout the community. Power understood as relational energy can be positive or negative. We can all attest to power in communities that is life giving and transformative and to power in communities that is destructive.

A second, perhaps more obvious biblical example of power as relational energy is the story of the birth of the church in Acts.

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On the day of Pentecost, the power of the Holy Spirit breaks in and the church is born. This power is hardly characterised by control. On the contrary, the power unleashed on the community brings bewilderment as it breaks apart ordinary rational understandings and expectations. The power of the Holy Spirit is profoundly unsettling, a threat to those who desire a world in which humans are fully in control. For those who think that the Spirit is an exotic phenomenon of mainly interior and purely personal significance, the story of the

power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost also offers a rebuke. Luke goes to great pains to insist that this outpouring of the Holy Spirit creates relationship; a profoundly relational energy, it binds people together even in their differences. But the collective the Spirit creates is not a withdrawn sect; the Spirit empowers the church to go public with its good news. This power of the Spirit is a gift of God to the church.

Implications for the church

If we regard power primarily as domination and control, we will view power negatively and tend to idealise powerlessness. If, on the other hand, we see power as an energy and a quality of relationships, that understanding will have implications for the theology and practice of the church. What are some dimensions of this change in perspective?

First, more relational understandings of power as energy remind us that power is not a limited resource. The Spirit offers the church an abundance of power. If we think about power as an “it,” we either begin fighting for power, as if there were not enough for everyone, or we claim powerlessness. Either way, we fail to recognise that power is something that lies between us. The empowerment of some need not entail the disempowerment of others. Mary Jo Leddy in *Radical Gratitude* suggests that we imagine power as electricity, as light and heat arcing between two poles, or as the energy that exists within atoms and between molecules. Everything in the world pulsates with immeasurable energy. The challenge, then, is not how to allocate a scarce resource to one or another person but how to activate vast stores of potential energy among us.

What this analogy makes clear is that power is activated through interaction. Just as a solitary pole cannot conduct energy, so power ceases to exist where people are isolated or alienated, whether they are rich or poor, women or men. Power emerges

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through interaction between people, when they pray, discuss, debate, and even disagree. However, when people are not allowed to participate, to interact, to be part of the discourse, the power of the church is sapped. The challenge for the church is not how to get more power, or even how to give power away, but how to claim, activate, and use this abundance of power that is available when two or three of us gather in Christ’s name.

Second, the church needs to face problems associated with our history of idealising a kind of powerlessness. When we understand power as domination and control, which, simply put, is bad and makes us do bad things, we are inclined to claim a kind of powerlessness. This idealisation of powerlessness has reinforced the subjugation of women in the church throughout the centuries. It has deprived people oppressed by unjust social structures of resources that could have helped them move toward liberation. Because of our idealisation of powerlessness we have failed to claim and tap into the power available among us.

Psychologist Michael Lerner has written about *Surplus Powerlessness*, which he describes as a set of beliefs and feelings we have about ourselves that leads us to feel that we will lose, that we will be isolated, that other people won't listen to us. These beliefs lead us to act in ways that make these fears come true. This variety of powerlessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: I don't believe that anyone will take me seriously, so I speak and act in ways that ensure that no one will listen to me. Surplus powerlessness can paralyse persons and groups, preventing them from speaking meaningfully and acting decisively. This sense of powerlessness

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becomes internalised and leads to feelings of worthlessness and of never being good enough.²

It is beyond the scope of this essay to develop an adequate theology of Christian powerlessness. However, a clue to understanding Christian powerlessness is found in our claim that all life is a gift of God. We don't earn our lives, nor are we fully in control of them, of our world, or the future,

but we dare to acknowledge that all life is received from God. We live by grace, a grace that we cannot control or earn but which is given to us. This awareness has profound implications for how we live our lives with gratitude, in non-controlling ways, and how we relate to others.

Finally, if power is relational energy, healthy power depends on healthy relationships. This relational understanding of power is both hopeful and problematic. It is promising in that it recognises the potential power in community, particularly the power of even a small group to bring about change. Feminist thinkers have for some time recognised that power may have less to do with economic or physical strength, weapons, or positions of authority, and more to do with the quality of relationships developed between people. But it would be naïve to think that human interaction is always good and is always better than isolation. Power that grows out of human interaction can be good or bad, depending on the nature of the relationships.

For example, we have believed that accountability is a necessary and important part of being a member of the church commu-

nity. As members of one body, we hold each other accountable to the faith commitments we have made. We keep this accountability going through a kind of surveillance, watching each other in order to keep each other in check. Our watching each other embodies a kind of relational power that can be positive or negative. Many of us are aware of times when this surveillance has become oppressive, when our communal idea of right and wrong is so pressed on members of the community that it becomes repressive, and a kind of silencing occurs. Power that is born out of human interaction can be for the better or for the worse. Healthy relationships and good discourse are critical to the healthy use of power.

God invites us into relationship and calls us to build relationships with one another based not on domination and control but rooted in the compassionate love and vulnerability we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A renewed understanding of power, conceived relationally, may help us better understand the nature of God's power, and it may aid us in building our life together as Christian community.

Notes

¹ Many of the ideas in this essay have their source in a course on theologies of power that I took with Mary Jo Leddy at the Toronto School of Theology. Leddy develops this relational understanding of power in her book *Radical Gratitude* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

² Michael Lerner, *Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday Life—And the Psychology of Individual and Social Transformation* (Oakland, Calif.: Institute for Labor & Mental Health, 1986).

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