

Spokane Friends Meeting

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“Life and Power”

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Hello from war-ravaged Portland, Oregon. If you have no idea what I’m talking about, count yourself lucky. In any case, things are actually quite calm in our beautiful city. That’s all I’ll say about Portland this morning.

Nearly 375 years ago, there were parts of England and Scotland that really were war-ravaged. The forces of the Commonwealth were fighting the forces of Charles the Second. In a so-called House of Correction in Derby, England, one remarkable prisoner was nearing the end of his sentence for blasphemy. He seemed to be very popular among the inmates, so that when Oliver Cromwell’s troops were in Derby, looking for men to serve in their army, the officers offered to get him released early if he would agree to serve as a captain for the Commonwealth.

You probably already know who I’m talking about. The popular inmate was George Fox, the first Quaker. Here’s part of his account of that day:

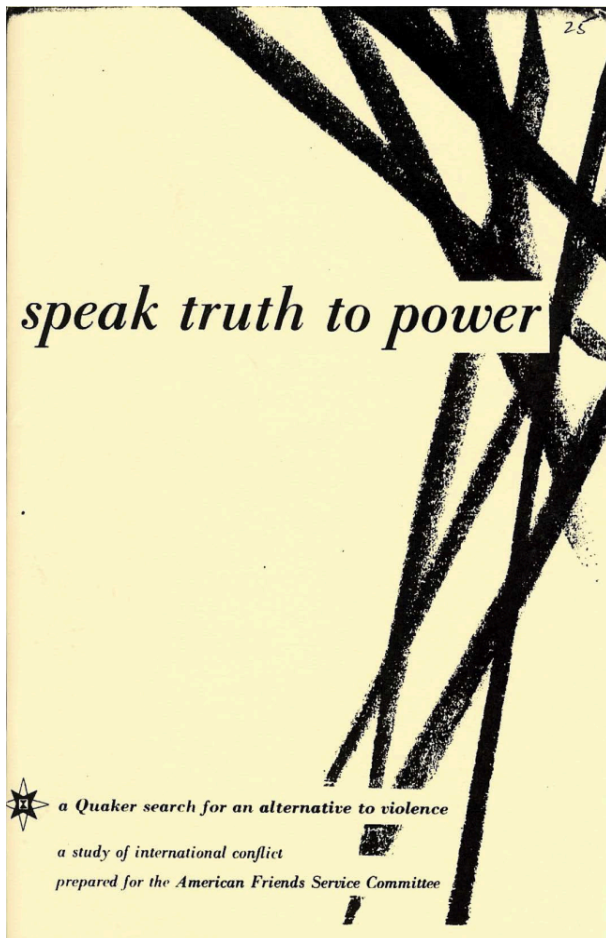
So the keeper of the House of Correction was commanded to bring me up before the Commissioners and soldiers in the market place; and there they proffered me that preferment [that is, the captaincy] because of ‘my virtue’ as they said, with many other compliments, and asked me if I would not take up arms for the Commonwealth against the King. But I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, and I knew from whence all wars did rise, from the lust according to James’s doctrine.

Still they courted me to accept of their offer and thought that I did but compliment with them. But I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were. [End of quotation. *Journal*, Nickalls edition, page 65.]

The enraged jailers threw him into the deepest part of the prison with thirty felons, although Fox concedes that sometimes they let him go out to the garden, because, as he says, they knew that he would not try to escape.

“I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” Recently I heard these words of George Fox quoted again, and the words “life and power” really struck me in a new way. By the word “life” I understand him to say that he based his daily life on his faith, on confidence that the promises of God were true. His use of the word “power” is, I believe, also rooted in that faith: despite the outward power of the jailers and soldiers, he had the power to make faith-based choices in the face of official coercion.

In part, his power is demonstrated in his popularity among the other prisoners who were also being recruited for Cromwell’s army. He reports, no doubt with some pride, “... Then they would have had me to be a captain of them and the soldiers cried they would have none but me.” And this was not the end of it; several more times they tried to recruit him as a line soldier, since he would not agree to be a captain, and even offered him money on top of freedom. I really hope you have a chance to look all this up in Fox’s *Journal*, in the early pages devoted to the year 1651, because it’s a fascinating, drawn-out conflict.



(1955)

We Quakers sometimes credit ourselves with “speaking truth to power,” a phrase which we probably overuse beyond its original meaning when Milton Mayer came up with it as the title for a cold-war era publication of the American Friends Service Committee. In Fox’s encounters, we see *power* speaking to power, a situation where truth and power are actually allies in confronting that other power that is ready to use violence. It’s power allied with truth that I’m interested in today.

One more illustration from Fox in 1651 before we turn to today’s Scripture.

In the midst of Fox’s struggles with the Commonwealth recruiters, while he’s still in Derby’s dungeon, he’s conducting a campaign against capital punishment for minor crimes, and against cruel prison conditions. One of his letters to the judges, or maybe the prayers with which he sent that letter, seems to have prevented the hanging of a young woman. Again, all this is in the *Journal*. He seems to have had no worries that a

letter from a convicted blasphemer wouldn't be taken seriously by those supposedly in power over him. Where did he get the authority to address them on their lack of mercy?

In today's Bible verses, Paul is writing to the people he had gathered and nurtured as the church in the city of Corinth during his year and a half among them. He's writing to them a couple of years later, from his new mission point in Ephesus, and recounting how he first came to know Corinthians. This is First Corinthians chapter two, the first five verses, in the New International Version:

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God [*or, alternately*, I proclaimed to you the mysteries of God]. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

I'm certainly not comparing myself to Paul, but I remember one of my very first sermons. I'd been asked by my boss, Fred Boots, at Quaker Hill Bookstore in Richmond, Indiana, if I'd be willing to substitute for him the following Sunday at the church he was pastoring in rural Indiana. With great fear and trembling, I somehow said "yes." When I actually showed up at that church, I preached on the importance of trustworthiness and transparency in church governance. After the meeting ended, I left at the first decent moment. Of course, after I returned home, I was both nervous and curious as to what Fred would hear about my performance, which I expected he would pass on to me the next time we were together at work. What he told me was that, first of all, he'd apparently neglected to tell somebody or other at the church that he wouldn't be there that Sunday. So, therefore, he was reprimanded by one of the church's elders, who said to him, "Not only were you not there, but *some boy* showed up and meddled in our business." I seemed to have innocently touched a nerve in

connection with some church conflict about which I did not know in advance. All I knew is, when Fred Boots told that story, the impression I'd left was of "some boy."

We don't exactly know what impression Paul first made on the Corinthians, but it was enough to give birth to a church. Even so, Paul's relationship with these people was complicated, and, evidently, his leadership was sometimes challenged. Listen to him a few chapters later, when he complains, in chapter four, verses 8 to 10, in the New English Bible translation,

All of you, no doubt, have everything you could desire. You have come into your fortune already. You have come into your kingdom—and left us out. How I wish you had indeed won your kingdom; then you might share it with us! For it seems to me God has made us apostles the most abject of [mankind]. We are like [those who are] condemned to death in the arena, a spectacle to the whole universe—angels as well as [humans]. We are fools for Christ's sake, while you are such sensible Christians.

A bit later, he goes on (verses 18 through 20),

There are certain persons who are filled with self-importance because they think I am not coming to Corinth. I shall come very soon, if the Lord will, and then I shall take the measure of these self-important people, not by what they say, but by what power is in them. The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power.

As a political scientist of sorts, I'm always fascinated by power, and how it's understood and used. The most basic definition of power, namely the capacity to cause or prevent change, seems strangely neutral. It refers neither to goals, nor motives, nor means. Linguistics gives us a clue: in some languages, the word "power" is linked to the word "flow." Electricity gives us an interesting metaphor: to "cut the power" is to cut off the flow of electricity, which otherwise would cause some form of change in what it connects to.

This gives us a way of thinking about healthy power and dangerous or oppressive power: what is it connected to? In what is the power grounded? I think Paul would say that the power he demonstrated among the Corinthians, the power that he associates with the kingdom of God, is connected to the Holy Spirit, who gives us the words to speak when we need them, as we're promised in Matthew 10:19 and Luke 12:12.

Does this mean that every use of power by a Christian must be directly and mystically connected to the Holy Spirit? I honestly can't be dogmatic about that. Instead I would like to suggest that when Quakers speak and act with power, it's based on a vision of connection, a vision we call Gospel Order. As Lloyd Lee Wilson explains in his book *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*,

Gospel order is the order established by God that exists in every part of creation, transcending the chaos that seems so often prevalent. It is the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator. Gospel order is the harmony and order which God established at the moment of creation, and which enables the individual aspects of creation to achieve that quality of being which God intended from the start, about which God could say that "it was very good." The spirit of the believer, opened to the Truth of Christ and about Christ as were George Fox and his fellow Children of the Light, is opened to the perception of the gospel order as well as the gospel, and empowered to attune one's life to it.

So here is a connection between the power we claim to be using ethically and faithfully, and its source in God. The change we propose to make or prevent is somehow linked to this vision of the relationship of all creation to our Creator.

Another connection may be just about equally important: the power we share with the community. Paul is making his appeal to those who know him in Corinth, who can testify to his legacy of service among them, and, by implication, comparing himself to those whose power is based on self-importance. It is a power that dares to be ratified by the community. Back when I was the general secretary of Friends United Meeting, I was visiting a Friends meeting in Kenya. The pastor introduced me, somewhat to my

surprise, as the Quaker pope. The Quaker pope?—that was certainly news to me. Even within our tiny Quaker world, I had nothing like the authority of the Catholic Pope to make or prevent changes. But, the thing is, I didn't want *that* kind of power. Anything I proposed had to convince my audience that my proposal was consistent with our values as a community, that is, with Gospel order.

We don't have popes, but that doesn't mean we don't have leaders. Quakers are correctly suspicious of presumptuous and domineering leadership, and some of us are Quakers *because* we've had experiences of that kind of leadership. Healthy leaders serve us when they consistently connect us with our own deepest hopes, drawing out our own power rather than hoarding power for themselves, giving us together a capacity for organizing ourselves that we might not all have individually, and doing all of that in full public view. There's a mutual accountability between leader and community. All leaders face criticism, as Paul evidently did in Corinth; their task is to learn from every criticism, no matter how tempted they are to respond defensively, and once they've completed that learning and offered in good faith to reconnect with their critics, then to put it all behind them. This is very different from a community that has learned to be suspicious of all outward leadership. Power that is not used in transparency and Gospel order doesn't just disappear; it may well give up and start working behind the scenes, relying on personality-driven persuasion instead of a connection with shared vision and values grounded in faith.

Now, if I had an urgent recommendation to make to you this morning, for example, something having to do with decisions you face as a congregation, or actions you might take in response to events on the national or global stage, you would not be convinced by my arguments simply because of my oratory or boyish personality. I have the power to make my case, but you have the power to compare what I'm saying with the Bible, with God's testimony within you, with Gospel order as you understand it. Whether I'm right or wrong, or whether you are right or wrong, I do not and should not have the power to override your collective discernment, and neither should anyone else, even if they should threaten to put you in the Derby jail.

Queries:

- Have you experienced a positive encounter with power? How did you know it was trustworthy?
- Have you experienced or witnessed an oppressive use of power? What helped you to discern this?
- You too have power. What helps you to know when to use it? If necessary, what would help you use it more often?
- What helps you deal with criticism, both fair and unfair?