

## Responses to Kraybill

(1) *Muriel Bechtel, Pastor*

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I am grateful to Nelson Kraybill for providing us with such a rich biblical context to this complex question of power and authority, and for including both sides of the paradox. The examples from Jesus' life and ministry and Paul's writings remind us that they too had to make choices between power and vulnerability, between servanthood and authority.

I admit I still get a little nervous when church leaders address this topic. I was at an impressionable age in the early 1970s when the Mennonite church had its love affair with servanthood as *the* model for its leaders. As a young stay-at-home mother I loved sharing my gifts in the church. I was encouraged to serve in the church like everyone else but not to be responsible in using my gifts as a leader. The message I heard was that I should aspire to servanthood, not to leadership. I still remember vividly one Sunday when the pastor expounded from the pedestal where I and others had placed him on the virtues of servanthood and the call to empty oneself as Jesus did. The next morning I sat in my living room and prayed with tears streaming down my face: "Take away my desire to do these things. Help me have the same attitude that Jesus did, and empty myself of my proud ambition."

Today, as a white, educated, economically secure, heterosexual, Swiss Mennonite pastor I see things from another perspective. Now I need those reminders to be a servant, but then it was painful for me to embrace Jesus' self-sacrifice and powerlessness as my ideal. Now I recognize my freedom and responsibility to choose whether I act on behalf of others or myself. Today I need reminders to be willing to set aside the privilege of my position and my power to influence, as Jesus did, to be willing sometimes to make such sacrifices for a greater purpose—so that others will have space to grow in power and authority. Now I sometimes need to be reminded not to think of myself more highly than I ought.

There are people in all of our churches and organizations, indeed the world, who have been well-schooled in servanthood, in humility, in putting others first. It is "bred in their bones." They need to be encouraged to find

their voices and speak the truth that is in them. They need to hear that it is important not only to love their neighbor but also to love themselves; not only to listen to their leaders but also to value their convictions and hopes, though they may differ from ours.

One of the most common ways we exercise power is by the way we participate in dialogue, the way we speak and listen. As leaders we exercise our power and authority by being clear about our convictions. I suggest that we exercise vulnerability by “hearing others into speech,” by encouraging others to speak *their* views with clarity and conviction. In order to create that safe space where others can participate and even disagree with us, we leaders need to be constantly discerning and learning how and when to speak.

We need to know when to speak for ourselves and when to speak for the group. Kraybill pointed out an example of that in Acts 15, where first of all Paul and Silas and others expressed their personal opinions. Only later after much dialogue, did James, the elder in the Jerusalem church, offer a proposal to test whether in fact he was speaking for the group. If we speak only for ourselves, we abdicate our responsibilities as leaders. If we speak only for the group, we take others’ voices away from them, especially those who see things differently.

Truly mutual dialogue is a delicate balancing act of power and vulnerability, and it is prepared for the possibility for change in both parties. An example of this kind of dialogue is Jesus’ encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30; Matt. 15:21-28). Their conflicting perspectives collided, and they both stated their convictions and their reasons. Though clearly she is the one with less power and authority, the woman holds her own. In the end, both are changed. Jesus is convinced, and the woman’s faith is confirmed because her daughter is healed.

### **Concerning men and women**

The observation about men who feel “disempowered” caught my attention, perhaps because it echoes concerns I have heard in our own congregation, mostly from women. A decade ago some of these women were starting to claim more of their power in the congregation. In many ways they were successful: they achieved many of the changes they wanted. In recent years, however, other changes have become evident. More women than men are

serving on church committees and boards. Are these two issues related? “What’s happening to the men?” one woman asked. One answer is that the men in our congregation are in a men’s group that meets regularly to deal with men’s issues. One of the newer men has commented that he appreciates learning from others in the group about gentleness and being vulnerable. But he also misses the decisiveness and willingness to give leadership that he was used to from men in the past. Meanwhile the women’s group of a decade ago has disbanded. Many of those women are mothers, and involved in careers or preparing for professions. The men are sharing more in household and parenting responsibilities.

We are in the midst of massive change as we learn new ways of working together as colleagues and peers. Our differences as men and women certainly create challenges as we work together more. But I would like to believe that most of us share a desire for healthier partnerships that empower both women and men. Learning new patterns of relating is bound to be unsettling, awkward, and for a time, disorienting and disempowering. In-between times are usually times of feeling somewhat frustrated and uncertain.

I know from personal experience that backing away from each other to find a safe space has been needed at times. But I am saddened when fear and anger become our abiding place and keep us from claiming the promise of truly mutual relationships that is provided “in Christ” (Gal. 3:28). We need each other, and we need each other’s gifts. I am convinced that beyond the frustration and pain there is the possibility of a new day; a day we help to create each time we exercise our power and authority alongside each other with both conviction and vulnerability. Kraybill’s paper has laid out the kind of groundwork needed for that possibility to become a reality. The work of translating it into action is before us.

(2) *Marcus Shantz*

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I would like to begin to consider a few of the current issues Nelson Kraybill identifies in light of the New Testament model he described.

1. Kraybill mentions that across North America, pastors need to take better care of themselves, and their congregations need to take better care of them. Many pastors are leaving the ministry. I wonder whether part of this problem is that our reading—or misreading—of the New Testament sometimes leads us to an unhealthy and joyless asceticism. This is not only an issue for pastors. Mennonite young people, students, and service workers are particularly susceptible. Yes, we should expect our leaders to follow Jesus' example as best they can. Yes, Jesus was a servant, he was poor, and he suffered to the point of death. But he didn't live that way *every day*; suffering had its time and place. Jesus made jokes. He took time off, alone. He enjoyed a good party. He indulged the occasional extravagance. He once gave wine to people who already had too much to drink. He even took a little criticism from followers of John the Baptist, seemingly for enjoying life too much.

When we forget this celebrative side of Jesus, we end up with pastors and church leaders who have difficulty nurturing anything but guilt in themselves. We may end up with congregations and agencies that inflict suffering on leaders—and their families—instead of offering support to carry on. And we end up with earnest but humorless young people, huddled around the *More-With-Less Cookbook* making soybean pie. They may be eating righteously, but are they able to celebrate?

2. Kraybill identifies a need for Mennonites to develop an awareness of the theological positions of other denominations. I wonder whether the New Testament calls us to more than a simple “awareness.” If the Acts story of vigorous debate among diverse Christians is normative, why are most Mennonites still largely ambivalent about ecumenical dialogue? If we Mennonites have something good, why not share it in conversation with other denominations? And why not risk being transformed by the good gifts of other Christians? For example, the contemplative practices of the Catholics and Anglicans—retreats, daily prayers, and spiritual direction—might help Mennonite leaders take better care of themselves. Ecumenical dialogue does

need to be approached with care; for Mennonites in certain parts of the world, the memory of oppression by other Christians is still fresh. We should be cautious, but we should also be faithful to our calling to actively engage other Christians.

3. Another of Kraybill's points [in his Postscript] is the need for North American Mennonites to learn from Mennonites in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. I agree completely. Yet if the Church really is the place where power and resources are distributed evenly, where various members do not lord it over each other but relate as servants, then we may need to move beyond "learning." In fact, I think this is the biggest power and authority issue we face. How do we really treat each other? In North America, we have in the past assumed that we set the theological agenda for all Mennonites. Are we ready to respond to visionary leadership from Mennonites in other parts of the world? We have created agencies that gather our money for use around the world, but our agencies do not usually invite Mennonites from other parts of the world to help decide how the money should be used, much less whether the agency itself is a good idea. We have not made ourselves and our money accountable to the world church. Many of our agencies and institutions are working honestly on these questions. We need to encourage and support them as they begin to grasp the answers.

(3) *Henry Landes*

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My reflections grow out of recent painful congregational and Conference experiences. During the past two years, my congregation went through a very difficult process which led to the termination of our associate pastor. Our elders and church council exercised power and authority which, save for a few exceptions, was basically affirmed by the congregation. Yet there was a huge cost in terms of the amount of time and emotional energy (guilt, anger, anxiety) required from all sides. Our elders, who carried the main responsibility in this messy matter, were wounded and weary, and within a few months the chair of church council resigned. Later in the same year, our

congregation faced another crisis. A Mennonite Youth Fellowship sponsor had an opportunity to join the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After his small group affirmed the pursuit of his lifelong dream, he met with the elders who did not affirm his joining the FBI. While there was some further dialogue, the conversations quickly polarized, leading to deep alienation with several members and attendees leaving the congregation. To use Shirley Showalter's phrase, we failed to find "the space so that people could talk."

My context also includes the wrenching process that the congregations of the Franconia Mennonite Conference have experienced in the last few years in dealing with the Germantown, Pennsylvania congregation. This process ultimately led to the expulsion of the Germantown congregation from Conference membership over their [acceptance of gays and lesbians as church members.] Personally, I was deeply disappointed, perhaps even disillusioned with the actions of leaders, delegates, members, and myself. Both of these crises represent the shadow side of our tradition. In the face of high conflict and anxiety, we moved away from our moorings in the heart of Jesus.

Nelson Kraybill has helpfully reviewed the biblical principles of leadership—attending, lifting, and loving in the spirit of Jesus. Kraybill reminds us of Friedman's call for leaders to be a non-anxious presence as they guide the discussion and action of a congregation, conference, or denomination. Certainly Jesus was a model of non-anxious presence. But how do we create and maintain a non-anxious presence in dealing with the flashpoints of our day such as homosexuality? How do leaders maintain confidence in themselves, in others, and in the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts 15 under extreme pressure from all sides? In my work with CEOs of companies, they often remark, "It's lonely at the top." Indeed, leadership is faced not only with loneliness but also high risk, whether in business or church.

In the face of a very anxious religious establishment, Jesus found out just how risky a "non-anxious presence" can be. Kraybill's review of Paul's life and teaching points to a somewhat more anxious presence and, of course, in a few centuries, that anxiety grew among Christian leaders who increasingly accepted the "sword" as a necessary part of "saving" the world. I remember John Howard Yoder frequently saying that Christians don't have

to make history come out right. Can we claim that same confidence about “not making our congregations and conferences come out right?”

In his postscript, Kraybill notes there is a danger that the Mennonite church will move too far in the direction of “professional ministry.” How do “pastors as employees” hold a non-anxious presence? How do the leaders of our denominational agencies/schools speak their truth about highly controversial issues when they almost surely face minor or even major loss of financial support?

In view of painful experiences with the churches such as Germantown, what are we learning about creating space for discussion and mutual address between congregations? While the dispute in Acts 15 seems to have resolved rather neatly, at least at the meeting, how do we treat each other in the Spirit of Christ? Perhaps Bill Klassen’s reminder of Pilgram Marpeck’s deep reluctance to break fellowship can help us hold our non-anxious presence in leading our often anxious congregations into deeper connection and Bible study.