

committed to the transformative values articulated and incarnated by Jesus. The church has repeatedly betrayed these values. Yet its sole purpose for being is to begin living now the way the whole world is called to live ultimately, and to represent the promise of another reality that holds the human future.<sup>18</sup>

Dying to the Powers is only the downside of rebirth, however. Rebirth is coming home to the universe, the rediscovery of beauty and of delight in the creation, the recovery of the capacity to love. It is the joy of belonging, of being a child of the Eternal. It is entry into the values of the society of partnership that is coming. And it is struggling with and against an institution the glory of whose task is matched only by the magnitude of its defections: the church.

### The Church and the Powers

The church has many functions, not all related to the Powers. With reference to the Powers, however, its task, as we have seen, is to unmask their idolatrous pretensions, to identify their dehumanizing values, to strip from them the mantle of respectability, and to disenfranchise their victims. It is uniquely equipped to help people unmask and die to the Powers.

The charter of the church in its struggle with the Powers is published in Eph. 3:10—"that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and powers in the heavenly places." This was the very passage that so defied conventional explanation, as we saw in *Naming the Powers*: how is the church, an earthly institution, supposed to carry out a revelatory task in reference to the Powers if they are in *heaven*?<sup>19</sup> What we discovered is that "the heavenlies" (*ta epourania*) are not off at the edge of space somewhere, but are in our very midst as the *interiority* of earthly institutions, systems, and structures. The task of the church, then, is to practice a ministry of disclosing the spirituality of these Powers.<sup>20</sup>

In the immediate context of Ephesians, the mystery that has been revealed to the world through the cross of Jesus is that the basis of racial or ethnic enmity has now been dissolved. Jew and Gentile are now one in Christ. The church's task is to make this new fact known to the ruling Powers "in the heavenlies," that invisible sphere where racism is so deeply imbedded.

To root out racism required new outer arrangements, and the church provided that: a fellowship of equals growing together into a "holy temple" (Eph. 2:21). But even more crucial was the eradication of the *spirit* of racism, and that could only be countered by the leveling impulse of the gospel.

The church cannot discharge its divine calling, however, by cozying up to the Powers and trying to win a hearing. What makes such attempts at accommodation to the Domination System so pathetic is that the System already recognizes those elements in the gospel which displeases it, and is contemptuous

of those who betray by such adjustments their own embarrassment with the gospel. Ignatius of Antioch sought to scoff such waffling when he said, "The greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the Domination System (*kosmos*), not in its being convincing to it."<sup>21</sup>

Those who have devoted their lives to the political side of social struggle may be mystified and even a bit uneasy about talk of changing the spirituality of the Powers as an integral part of resistance. They have seen all too many Christians limit their efforts to perfunctory prayers for the general betterment of humanity. Their fears are well-founded. A recent study of mainline denominations in the United States reveals that 78 percent of adult church members never spend *any* time promoting social justice.<sup>22</sup> It is important to stress that the issue is not either/or but both/and: The effort to change structural arrangements must also include changing the spiritual gestalt that may survive our structural changes and undermine their efficacy.

No social struggle can hope to be effective if it only changes structural arrangements without altering their spirituality. All our letter writing, petitioning, political and community organizing, demonstrating, civil disobedience, prayers and fasting move to this end: to recall the Powers to the humanizing purposes of God revealed in Jesus. We are not commissioned to create a new society; indeed, we are scarcely competent to do so. What the church can do best, though it does so all too seldom, is to delegitimize an unjust system and to create a spiritual counterclimate. We may lack the wisdom to determine how homelessness can be solved; and our attempts as churches to feed, clothe, and house the homeless may only obscure the true causes of homelessness and fill us with false righteousness. But what we can do is create an insistent demand that homelessness be eradicated.

We are not "building the Kingdom," as an earlier generation liked to put it. We simply lack the power to force the Powers to change. We faithfully do what we can with no illusions about our prospects for direct impact. We merely prepare the ground and sow; the seed grows of itself, night and day, until the harvest (Mark 4:26-29). And God will—this is our most profound conviction—bring the harvest.

This does not mean that our opposition to the Powers, pitiful as it may be, is irrelevant. Far from it. The church is to be like a bulldog that sinks its teeth into an elephant's leg. It cannot bring the elephant down, but it can so distract the elephant's attention that it fails to notice the elephant trap and plunges in.

Every oppressive regime regularly digs an elephant trap for itself. Hybris is the very essence of their lust for power. The dictators Marcos and Pinochet themselves called the elections that proved their downfall. The failed coup in the Soviet Union (1991) brought about the very reforms it sought to prevent.

But unless there is a group of people prepared to capitalize on these blunders, nothing comes of them. When people are ready, however, these acts of hybridity become what peace activist Bill Moyer calls "trigger events": the coincidence of a prepared opposition and a public outrage that creates general awareness and indignation.<sup>23</sup>

Rosa Parks, whose arrest for refusing to sit in the back of the bus sparked the civil rights movement, was not just "tired"; she was an officer in the NAACP and had attended training sessions in nonviolent resistance. And her arrest could act as the spark to ignite the civil rights movement because Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State College, had already, a year and a half earlier, threatened the mayor of Montgomery with a boycott if conditions on buses for black people were not improved. Months earlier the black Women's Political Council, of which she was president, had drawn up plans for the distribution of fifty thousand notices calling people to boycott the buses; only the specifics of time and place had to be added. When she heard of Rosa Parks's arrest, she worked through the night with the help of two students mimeographing tens of thousands of leaflets announcing the boycott. Thanks to the distribution system already set up by the women, practically every black man, woman, and child in Montgomery knew of the bus boycott within a few hours.<sup>24</sup> Parks and Robinson were virtually lying in ambush for the trigger event that could launch their movement.

The movement against nuclear energy faithfully built up a constituency, and exercised all available forms of democratic intervention, referenda, and injunctions. But it could not by itself stop the increase of nuclear reactors. Already 260 were operating, ordered, or under contract by 1974. It was the disaster at Three Mile Island in 1979 that galvanized public resistance and halted ground breaking for any additional nuclear reactors.

But a similar disaster occurred at the Fermi reactor in Alabama in 1966, and the fact was withheld from public knowledge. There was no sizable movement of protest to which information about that disaster might be leaked, and the public attitude was still one of trust. Trigger events are wasted when the people are not prepared to capitalize on them.<sup>25</sup> Wisdom's unexpected opportunities must be met by Wisdom's children, ready to press into the opened breach.

Others may be far more competent in actually effecting structural change, but the church is, of all institutions in society, best equipped to expose the idolatrous spirituality of human systems. The slavery which communism imposed on a third of humanity was the outcome of a spirit, not of economics. Nazism's capacity to mobilize emotions was the consequence of a spirit, not of politics. Idolatries so powerful cannot be countered with mere hatred. What is needed is something that recalls these rebellious Powers to the One in and through and

for whom they exist. What exposes and confounds them, what drives them into a frenzy of rage that blinds them to the elephant trap of God's historical ironies, is being called upon to praise God. Ps. 29:1-2\* shows how this is to be done:

Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings [lit., sons of gods],  
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.  
Ascribe to Yahweh the glory of God's name;  
worship Yahweh in the sacred court.

Here the Principalities and Powers in their spiritual manifestation—that is, as the interiority of earthly institutions—are being called upon to abdicate all pretensions to absoluteness, and to offer praise and worship to the true God. Praise is the homeostatic principle of the universe. It preserves the harmony of the whole by preventing usurpation of the whole by its parts. Praise is the ecological principle of divinity whereby every creature is subordinated to its organic relationship with the Creator. *Praise is the cure for the apostasy of the Powers.*

The command expressed in the psalm is not issued by God, however, but by us! In all simplicity, this is finally the task of the church over against the Powers: to remind the Powers to whom they belong. "Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength." It is all so clear. We are simply to proclaim to IBM and Gulf + Western and the current political administration and the pettifogging bureaucrat that they do not exist as ends in themselves, but for the humanizing purposes of God as revealed in Jesus. We do not have to relate them to God. They are already, by virtue of their creation, related to God. We simply have to remind them that they exist in and through and for God.

It is a curious fact that people already sense their belonging to that greater whole. Regardless of their ethical barbarity, they want to be *treated by others* according to humane values. People know in their bones that kindness is right and that domination is wrong. Governments and businesses spend billions trying to convince themselves and persuade others that they abide by moral values, even when they are in flagrant violation of them. The church merely has to remind them of what they already, at some deep level, know.

The church, however, is but one among many groups that struggles to humanize the Powers. God, fortunately, is not solely dependent on the church! In Matt. 25:31-46, those who are declared "blessed" of the Abba are not necessarily Christians, but people who actually behave lovingly toward the hungry, homeless, refugees, and prisoners. They do not act this way because they have been taught that in so doing they do it to Christ. Indeed, they are surprised to learn that their acts of compassion were in fact done to him. Nor do they do it out of duty, or to earn a reward. We do not, in fact, know why they do it, or who

they are. They may be atheists, Jews, Muslims; they may be addicts, convicts, whores. The tax collectors and the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of God ahead of some religious people, asserts Jesus (Matt. 21:31). Apparently Jesus' God is interested in one thing only: whether we behave in a way consistent with the divine order that is coming. Our religious preferences, practices, and affiliations are, next to that, a matter of indifference.

How then can the church carry on the struggle with the Powers more effectively? How can it shake off the suffocating weight of institutional self-preservation and make a difference in the world? How can it engage the Powers with the redemptive power of the cross? What kinds of action and spirituality must it cultivate to be able to serve God in the redemption of the Powers? We address these questions in the remainder of the book.

## Part 3

### ENGAGING THE POWERS NONVIOLENTLY