

# “Who’ll Be a Witness for My Lord?”

## Exploring the Power to Be a Witness

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The Christian church’s expansive zeal has often, throughout its history, walked hand in hand with the colonial pursuits of empires and nation-states. This cooperative approach between church and empire, which is most apparent in Christendom, has implicated the church, and the Christian faith in general, with the oppressive and violent exploitation that has come through colonialism and its painful history. This Christendom legacy and its corresponding Constantinian imagination<sup>1</sup> have left their mark on how the church and its role are understood in the South African context.

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1 Although terms such as “Christendom” and “Constantinianism” have become common and mostly synonymous, it may still be useful to offer a definition of the way these terms will be used in this paper. Both Christendom and Constantinianism refer to the impulse to synthesize the purposes of the church and state into a reconciled and compatible partnership. This synthesis was energized over a period of time that included the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 CE; the legalization of the Christian faith within the Empire declared in the Edict of Milan in 313 CE; Theodosius I making Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 380 CE; and the declaration of the illegality of pagan religions in the Empire in 392 CE, which in effect made the Christian faith mandatory and compulsory for all citizens of the Empire. This intentional integration (“marriage”) of the church with the Empire resulted in a basic division of labor based on the joint assumptions that (1) the state was primarily responsible for the social conditions within the state (or Empire), determining the way in which society would be structured and the way those within its geographic boundaries would relate to one another (i.e., the political), and (2) the church would focus primarily on the inner, spiritual health of the state’s (or Empire’s) citizens. In this paper, “Constantinianism” is used to describe the logic that undergirds the historic example of Christendom.

For more on these concepts see John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135–47;

One of the main issues of the “Constantinian shift,” I argue, is the way the church adopted the empire’s understanding of power. The post-Constantinian church (i.e., the church after Constantine) has largely come to accept power defined as the ability to cause something to happen by exerting force or influencing something or someone toward a desired end. Given this understanding of power, the church in its desire to bring about social change has accepted the mentality that it must become an ally of that which wields power—namely, the empire or state. This alliance has been, and indeed continues to be, the common assumption in the South African context.

In this paper, I argue that Jesus’s promise to the apostles of the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the power that would accompany its arrival, as told in Acts 1, offers an alternative understanding of power. Jesus’s promise offers, I argue, a useful perspective whereby the church in South Africa and beyond can reclaim its prophetic stance as it embodies an alternative politic that this alternative form of power requires.

### The Church in the South African Context

South Africa’s complex history since the seventeenth century can be summarized as a history of colonization. Apartheid, an Afrikaans word that means “aparthood” or “apartness,” grew out of a long history of complex relations between Europeans who landed at the Cape—the southern tip of Africa—and those who were native to the land. Although the official policy of apartheid was not introduced until 1948, the history of colonialism and white privilege in South Africa dates back to the arrival of the first European colonists in 1652. A mindset of “European” and “white” superiority, along with common practices that emerged from this mindset, existed from the outset.

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John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2003), 65–84; John Howard Yoder, “The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 1998), 242–61; Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 74–78; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong*, expanded 25th anniversary edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 30–48; John D. Roth, *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013); John W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 219–20; Emmanuel Katongole and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); and Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

Thus, segregated practices were firmly in place long before the introduction of apartheid as an official governing policy in 1948. What was new in 1948 was the National Party’s implementation of racial separation and segregation into law. These policies and laws, based on an ideologically rigid character of “separate development,” affected all of life—where one could live; how one was educated; what kind of education one received; with whom one could associate; who one could marry; what church one could attend; and so forth. These policies and the ideological character that supported them determined race relations for the rest of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> firmly entrenching white privilege within the legal and social structure of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

These developments also ensured the complexity of the Christian church’s story in South Africa. In large part, the white church in South Africa joined hand in hand with the colonizing powers upon their arrival, detaching the reality of white privilege from the social implications of the gospel. From the moment of initial contact, the Europeans and the Christian churches they established nurtured an understanding of white superiority and identity. The church either actively supported—or stood silently by—the colonizing powers structuring a society that assumed white dominance, authority, and superiority, which formed the basis of “separate development.” The church at its worst became a tool that would help transform African society to align with European assumptions and customs. This was true not only of the Afrikaner churches—the Dutch Reformed Church, specifically—but also of the so-called English-speaking churches that emerged (Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist, and Presbyterian) with the introduction of British rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> These so-called English-speaking churches followed the already established pattern of their Afrikaner or Dutch counterparts.<sup>5</sup> As John de Gruchy, one of South Africa’s eminent theologians, has noted, the church and its life were determined by “social pressure and pragmatism, custom and culture, rather than theology and scripture.”<sup>6</sup> Put simply,

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2 John W. de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 51.

3 For a more thorough and comprehensive examination of the rise of apartheid and the church’s role and responses to it, see De Gruchy and De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*.

4 See James Cochrane, *Servants of Power: The Role of English-Speaking Churches 1903–1930* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Ravan, 1987).

5 De Gruchy and De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 13.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

the church was a tool that embedded a notion of European white superiority in South Africa.

Although the pattern of the established churches was to assume a mindset based on white dominance and privilege, missionaries, largely due to their close contact with marginalized and oppressed communities, became openly critical and often opposed the colonialism being established.<sup>7</sup> “Mission churches,” comprised primarily of people who were considered “non-white,” developed a significantly different identity than “settler churches,” which were comprised primarily of white settlers. The former inevitably engaged in issues of justice and inequality as they continuously faced issues of oppression and dehumanization. Indeed, as Richard Elphick has asserted in his book *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*, the seed of South African egalitarianism was the theological proclamation of the early missionaries.<sup>8</sup> “White settlers,” Elphick writes, “understood the message of evangelical missionaries to promise the Khoisan salvation in the next life, but, more threateningly, social equality in this one.”<sup>9</sup> Eventually this would develop into a tradition of what can be described as “prophetic theology.”<sup>10</sup> Such “prophetic theology” continued to sow seeds of equality and justice, offering another embodied politic that challenged the injustices of colonialism and apartheid.

Thus, the complexity of South Africa’s history is also found within the church, a church that nurtured both the colonizing European powers, which justified racial segregation and separation, as well as an alternative imagination that called such colonization into question. Those who would later be described as “prophetic” found ways of forming and belonging to communities that proved to offer an alternative politic in the face of the dehumanizing, colonial power exerted over them. It was an embodiment of an alternative under-

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example the distinction made in de Gruchy’s *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 1–18, as well as Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> The 1985 *Kairos Document: A Challenge to the Church* described such a theology that challenged the status quo of oppression and injustice as “Prophetic Theology.” See “The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa (First Edition, Braamfontein, 1985),” in *The Kairos Documents*, ed. Gary S. D. Leonard (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, 2010).

standing of power that was most apparent through the people’s cry, “*Amandla; awethu!*” (Power is ours!).

### Exploring the Nature of Power

Unfortunately, as South Africa has been moving into its new liberal, or neo-liberal, political dispensation after the official demise of apartheid in 1994, the church, even in its “prophetic” form, has been falling back into the ever-present Constantinian, or neo-Constantinian, temptation in the way power is understood and embodied. It has been falling into the trap whereby, as William Cavanaugh describes it, the country is viewed as an organic whole—the state being responsible for the bodies, the church for the souls.<sup>11</sup> As such, the church in South Africa has also been releasing the alternative perspective of power it once embodied. It has been moving away from the “*Amandla; awethu*” understanding to an understanding based on influence and force to order society; an understanding commonly accepted as the role in “civil society.”<sup>12</sup>

The insidious temptation to possess “power over”—power that is based on the pursuit of directing or influencing the behavior of others or the course of events—is confronted and challenged by the biblical narrative and depiction of the form of power that it portrays as “godly.” For example, a small and seemingly insignificant nation becomes the chosen people of God; a child defeats a notorious warrior with pebbles and a slingshot; a savior is born in a barn and becomes the son of a carpenter; death, ironically, overcomes death and provides the possibility for life. All of these examples demonstrate the radically alternative way in which God works. They also, I think, demonstrate what we often miss—the paradoxical nature of God’s power. God’s work demonstrates an alternative imagination as to what is possible, challenging us to align our lives according to such an imagination. The difficulty, it seems, is not only aligning our lives and the way we participate in God’s mission, but also *believing* and *trusting* in this seemingly illogical character of power embodied throughout the story of God’s active presence in the world.

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11 William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 16.

12 For a very good and interesting portrayal regarding the way “civil society” plays into state politics, see Michael Neocosmos, “Civil Society, Citizenship and the Politics of the (Im)Possible: Rethinking Militancy in Africa Today,” *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 1, no. 2 (2009): 263–334.

The promise Jesus makes to his disciples in the beginning of Acts helps us, I think, grapple with and better understand this alternative form and understanding of power.<sup>13</sup>

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:4–8)<sup>14</sup>

The book of Acts begins with Jesus reminding his disciples of the promise he has made about the arrival of the Holy Spirit. This is the fulfillment of Jesus’s promise that, once he departs, another helper will come to walk with, accompany, and strengthen the disciples in their journey of being like their teacher. This promise, the fire that the author already foretells in Luke 3:16,<sup>15</sup> is fulfilled in Acts 2 with the arrival of the Holy Spirit—namely, the Pentecost event. We are led, in other words, to assume that with the fiery arrival of the Holy Spirit, the promise that Jesus makes in Acts 1:4–8 is fulfilled: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

The rest of Acts goes on to demonstrate the way in which the Holy Spirit works in and through this newly formed community—the church, a community that was itself formed by the Holy Spirit. The Pentecost event marks a moment in which the power of God is bestowed upon Jesus’s disciples. It also marks the moment in which the disciples received the power to follow the example of their teacher. The promise made in Luke 6:40—“a disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher”—is fulfilled through the lives of Jesus’s disciples who, like Jesus, act and suffer because of the ways of Christ.

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13 Besides a few minor changes, the remainder of this paper was first published as “‘Who’ll Be a Witness for My Lord?’: Witnessing as an Ecclesiological and Missiological Paradigm,” *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 44, no. 1 (2016): 68–84.

14 All scriptural references in this paper come from the NKJV.

15 “John answered, saying to them all, ‘I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’” (Luke 3:16).

The key to understanding the ability of the disciples to behave according to the example Jesus provided lies in understanding the purpose of the power they received from the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8, we find Jesus promising that the disciples “shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The power that the disciples were to receive, in other words, would allow them to be witnesses to Jesus.

In order to better understand the significance of Jesus’s promise as well as the apostle’s actions after Pentecost, we must understand the meaning and significance of the words power (*dunamis*) and authority (*exousia*), especially as they are used in both Luke and Acts, the two biblical volumes written by the same author. These two words, *dunamis* and *exousia*, are commonly used in reference to power. But the two are not synonymous. Indeed, there are some significant and interesting differences in how these two terms are used.

*Dunamis* is used fifteen times in Luke and ten times in the book of Acts. The author uses *dunamis* to refer to the ability to act. More than this, the word refers to an activity that transforms things. In every instance except for one (Luke 10:19 uses it to describe “the power of the enemy”), this term is used to describe either the characteristic and ability of God (e.g., “power of the most High”; “power of the Holy Spirit”; “power of the Lord”; “power of God”; etc.) or the extension of what is possible because of this godly power (e.g., power to heal, power to cast out demons, power to do mighty works, power to do signs and miracles, etc.). *Dunamis* is almost exclusively used to describe the ability of God or those committed to acting in the ways of God—in a way that transforms something.

*Exousia* is often used to describe power in relation to authority. The author of Luke-Acts uses this term to talk more about possessing the authority to act than the ability to act itself. This term is used sixteen times in Luke and seven times in the book of Acts. Whereas *dunamis* is used in a largely positive sense (except for the one instance in Luke 10:19), *exousia* is more complex. *Exousia* is used positively when it refers to authority belonging to God or Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Yet seventeen of the twenty-three times the author uses *exousia*, it is used in a more negative way. It is often used in an almost derogatory way in referring to those who are in positions that rule over others and possess “worldly,” as

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in Luke 4:32 and 4:36, Jesus has authority over spirits; 5:24 Jesus has authority/power to forgive sins; 9:1 Jesus gives authority to the disciples to cast out demons and to heal; 10:19 Jesus gives authority to the disciples to trample serpents and scorpions, and the power of the enemy; Acts 1:7 God has authority; 8:19 Simon requests authority so that people can receive the Holy Spirit.

opposed to godly, authority.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there are several instances where the author's use of *exousia* as authority to rule over others is the opposite of godly power.<sup>18</sup>

In exploring the ways in which these two terms are used to describe power in Luke-Acts, it becomes apparent that the form of power associated with possessing authority *over* others is not, it seems, the way of Jesus or the desire of God.<sup>19</sup> God is the rightful possessor of authority (Acts 1:7), but authority *over*

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17 E.g., Luke 4:6 refers to the authority that the devil possesses and provides; 7:8 refers to the authority the Centurion possesses over others; 12:11 refers to those who rule society—leaders in the synagogues, the magistrates, and the authorities; 19:17 refers to the authority a servant receives over cities; 20:2 the chief priests and scribes ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things?”; 20:8 Jesus does not respond to the question regarding authority; 20:20 notes that authority is possessed by the governor (particularly interesting, considering the rest of the dialogue in the chapter that leads to this statement); 22:53 refers to the power of darkness; 23:7 refers to what is in Herod's jurisdiction; Acts 5:4 refers to the power/control that Ananias had over his own land and possessions; 9:14, 26:10, and 26:12 authority is in reference to the chief priests; and 26:18 refers to the power of Satan.

18 Three examples will suffice in demonstrating this point: (1) In the temptations of Jesus, the devil speaks about the authority (*exousia*) he possesses and with which he tempts Jesus: “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this *has* been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). Here *exousia* is a possession and a tool of the devil. (2) A second example can be found when Jesus's authority is questioned (Luke 20:1–8). Jesus is asked, “By what authority are You doing these things [miracles, healing, driving out unclean spirits, etc.]?” Rather than getting into a battle about who has authority (*exousia*), Jesus—in a similar move to that of the temptations where he failed to participate in the quest for the same type of authority that the devil possesses—sidesteps the question and refuses to participate in the system of ruling over, or having authority over, others. Interestingly, however, the author throws into the same chapter another reference that highlights that authority—the type of authority Jesus sidesteps—is something that the governor possesses. *Exousia*, in other words, when portrayed as having authority *over* others, is again distinguished as a feature of worldly kingdoms or rulership, not a feature in the ways of God's kingdom and God's form of authority (which again brings into perspective the second temptation of Jesus regarding the nature of the kingdoms of this world—Luke 4:5–8). (3) Lastly, in Acts 26 there is an interesting interplay in the way *exousia* is used. In the three times *exousia* is used in this chapter, the first two times it describes the authority of the chief priests, a reference made to Paul's old life when he was persecuting the church (26:10, 12). The last time, in 26:18, it is used to describe the power of Satan. Although there are more examples that can be given, these three serve to demonstrate the point that *exousia*, when not referring to God's authority, is often used with a more negative connotation.

19 Note that I am not making a generalized conclusion about the nature of *exousia* in the whole New Testament. To do this, we would need to look beyond Luke and

others is not the way in which power is to be embodied among Jesus’s followers. Indeed, immediately after the author notes that God is the rightful possessor of authority (*exousia*), he specifies that the apostles shall receive power (*dunamis*) when the Holy Spirit descends upon them. The power (*dunamis*) or ability to act referred to in this verse is the ability to be witnesses to Jesus. The word translated as “witnesses” here is the Greek word (*martus*). It is noteworthy that this same word would later be used to describe those who would die because of their faith—martyrs. Out of all of the derivatives of *martyrion*, *martus* is the form most often used in the book of Acts (thirteen times). Although *martus* at first meant “to give witness to” or “to testify” and was not necessarily connected to death, it is significant that in a very short period of time *martus* would become associated with death and martyrdom.<sup>20</sup> Already in the book of Acts, for example, we are told about Stephen who becomes the first martyr. Peter, Paul, and countless others in the early church soon meet the same fate. Christian faith and being a “witness” to Jesus Christ, in other words, became closely associated with martyrdom in the early years of the church. The bodies of the early Christians were, in a very literal way, given as a living sacrifice and testimony to God. Martyrdom became but one species of a larger narrative genre. This genre comprehends the death of believers at the hands of hostile authorities within a wide range of other faithful practices. Through these practices, martyrdom became a bodily witness to God’s drama of salvation in the world.<sup>21</sup>

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Acts. I am here drawing this conclusion from the way this term is used specifically in Luke and Acts. For a broader perspective on how such terms are used throughout the New Testament, see Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984). What is noteworthy in Wink’s book is that 85 percent of the time that *exousia* is used in the New Testament, it refers to a “structural dimension of existence” (*Naming the Powers*, 15–16) that is often depicted as fallen. See also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 134–61.

<sup>20</sup> We can already see the connection between *martus* and death in several instances in the book of Revelation (e.g., Rev 1:5, 2:13, 6:9, 12:11, 17:6). Scholars suggest that Revelation was written in the 90s CE. There is ongoing debate as to when the book of Acts was written. Some argue it was written in the 80s, whereas others argue it was written in the early 60s. Either way, we can see how the meaning of *martus* began to shift from simply meaning “testifying” to an understanding that intimately connected testifying with death and martyrdom.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Fowl, “The Primacy of the Witness of the Body to Martyrdom in Paul,” in *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 44.

Thus, the power Jesus promises through the arrival of the Holy Spirit points to a vastly different understanding of power. Whereas power in the post-Constantinian church has largely embraced the way empire has defined power—a top-down, hierarchically based form of power and authority that seeks to affect the way society is ruled, which has meant bringing about change through force, domination, conquest, and control—the power that Jesus promises is one that allows those who receive it to mimic the ways of Jesus and the desire of God. It is a promise of receiving *dunamis* that invites followers of Jesus to challenge injustice and violence; to heal; and to participate in mighty works in a way that is based on love, invitation, servanthood, and care for the other. The form of power that Jesus promises is one that allows those who receive it from the Holy Spirit to live in ways that imitate the life and kenotic example of Jesus, even if, like their teacher, it also leads to one's own death.<sup>22</sup> The power of the Holy Spirit promised in Acts 1:8, in other words, is the power to live a life of self-sacrificial love—an *agape*, *kenotic* love that was exemplified in the life *and death* of Jesus Christ.

### Implications of Being a Witness

If we embrace and seek to embody this alternative form of power that Jesus promises when the Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles, it will change the way we live and the way we understand and participate in God's mission. It will cause us to re-imagine the way in which we embody our ecclesial and missiological practices. Allow me to highlight three implications of such an understanding.

(1) The first implication is that we recognize the power that exists in vulnerability and incarnation. This recognition challenges us to acknowledge the social location of power, learning to see the power that exists away from the centers of social hegemony. This acknowledgment may, initially, seem foolish. And yet Jesus models such an approach to power. Possessing the power to be “witnesses” to Jesus Christ means that we will not mimic forms of power that dominate, oppress, conquer, or force—that are violent in their very nature—even if such power may lead to “Christianizing” those who are conquered. We must step away from the all-too-common Christendom-based ecclesiologies

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<sup>22</sup> The World Council of Church's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism describes this as receiving the inspiration from the Holy Spirit “to a self-emptying and cross-bearing life-style” as we bear witness “to the love of God in word and deed.” See Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), 37.

and missiologies that operate according to a post-Constantinian understanding of power and structure their practices accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

The World Council of Church’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, for example, in its “New Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism” recognizes the need to shift our missional understanding from “mission to the margins” to “mission from the margins.”<sup>24</sup> It notes how mission has often been an activity that has gone from the center to the periphery, from the privileged to the marginalized of society.<sup>25</sup> However, “mission expressed in this way has too often been complicit with oppressive and life-denying systems. It has generally aligned with the privileges of the centre and largely failed to challenge economic, social, cultural, and political systems which have marginalized some peoples. Mission from the centre is motivated by an attitude of paternalism and a superiority complex.”<sup>26</sup>

The power to be a “witness” therefore embraces a confessional foundation—a foundation that cannot be forced. Such a confessional foundation was so clear in the life of the early church that a theology of two baptisms emerged: the first by water, and the second by blood. The early church recognized that the act of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord—a politically loaded confession—could very well lead to their death. And yet, it was precisely this act of confession, even in the face of death, that demonstrated a different allegiance and a different understanding of power. Joerg Rieger, in looking at Philippians 2, notes that the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus provides a different sort of power that Jesus embodies—a power that is in diametrical opposition to the power of the emperor.<sup>27</sup> And it was this diametrically alternative form of

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23 J. Kameron Carter, for example, introduces what he describes as the “color of Constantinianism” in his description of how, with the advent of modernity, Christianity became a vehicle for white European conquest. Constantinian Christianity could adopt this form of racialized colonialism because of its oppressive understanding of power and because of how it became severed from “the other” (i.e., by severing its Jewish roots) who was foreign to European Christendom. “Remade into cultural and political property and converted into an ideological instrument to aid and abet colonial conquest, Christianity became a vehicle for the religious articulation of whiteness, though increasingly masked to the point of near invisibility.” Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

24 World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life*, 14–17.

25 *Ibid.*, 5.

26 *Ibid.*, 16.

27 Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 43.

power that led to Jesus's own death as well as the death of many confessors in the early church.

And yet, it is in this way that martyrdom was (and is) missiological. Tripp York, in referring to Maximilian's example, notes that

though the empire killed [Maximilian] for his refusal to worship their gods, his act, as any act of martyrdom, was not against the empire—as if Christian witness is merely reactionary or defined by what it is against. Rather, his martyrdom and early Christian martyrdom in general was *for* the empire. Any act of witness is always a testimony to the good news that is the resurrected Christ, which gives those watching the ability to see the world as it really is: redeemed.<sup>28</sup>

One's confessional stance causes him or her to be a witness of an alternative body politic, which puts into practice different ways of being that seek to live rightly with one another. Such an alternative way of being may lead to the same consequence that befell Jesus, the one who inaugurated it.<sup>29</sup>

(2) The second implication, which logically follows from the first, is that ecclesial and missiological practices that have as their foundation this alternative form of power—the power to be witnesses—are guided by the ability and the willingness to die for the other. Jesus's life *and* death offer the ultimate example. Throughout Jesus's life and teachings, we can see his ongoing concern for people to live justly and in peace with one another, to live in right relationships. This tireless concern became embodied in a life and lifestyle whereby the cross became a politically motivated, legally to-be-expected result of a moral clash with the principalities and powers. Jesus's example demonstrated—witnessed—the embodiment of a different form of power, one based on self-sacrificial love rather than violence and a willingness to kill.

Thus, a paradigm of being witnesses will be concerned not only with participating in God's great *shalom* project—that is, seeking peace and justice so that we may live rightly with one another, with creation, and with God—but also with the *way* this project is pursued: imitating the ways of Jesus, even unto death. Both embodying right relationships and dying in that pursuit provide a witness to Jesus and the kingdom he envisioned and inaugurated.

(3) The final implication I will mention, although there are many more, is the confidence we can now have because of the resurrection. The power to be a

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<sup>28</sup> Tripp York, "Early Church Martyrdom: Witnessing for or against the Empire?," in *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 23–24.

<sup>29</sup> Note, for example, paragraphs 89 and 92 in World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life*.

witness, which led to the cross, provided the opportunity for the resurrection. Thus, because of the resurrection we no longer need to live in fear of living lives based on the example and teaching of Jesus and the allegiance we pledge to him. The Spirit received at Pentecost, and the power promised upon the Spirit’s reception (Acts 1:8), “gives Christians courage to live out their convictions, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom.”<sup>30</sup>

Fear of death brings about more death. Yet Jesus demonstrates that death is defeated, ironically, through willingness to die for the other. Through Jesus’s death, we have learned that death no longer has the final word. Thus, even though witnessing to Jesus will cause us to live a life or embody a lifestyle that may result in our own deaths, we can live in confidence knowing that death has been defeated.

## Conclusion

To be a “witness” to Jesus Christ is to embrace and live according to an alternative understanding of power. The power that the Holy Spirit bestows is that which allows followers of Jesus to live in ways that demonstrate the same kind of self-sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated through his life *and* death. Unlike the power that empires and states embody, the power that the Holy Spirit provides is the ability to live and potentially die for the other.

The desire for everyone to belong and be treated equally and justly was the vision that led the struggle against apartheid. But it was recognizing the power that existed on the margins, in those whom the apartheid system believed did not count, and accepting the willingness to suffer and even die in pursuit of that vision of justice and true peace that provided the foundation for the practices and the politic of a “prophetic theology” in the South African context. Thus, if the desire is to find and reclaim a “prophetic theology,” then the South African church—indeed the worldwide church—must begin once again to embrace a form of power that is rooted in self-sacrificial, vulnerable love for the other. It behooves us to embrace the power to be a “witness.”

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.