CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND HUMAN POWER:
THE DYNAMIC OF JUDGMENT AND TRANSFORMATION
IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

"And what is the immeasurable greatness of (God’s) power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and domination and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come" (Ep 1:19-21).

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, in order that the excellence of the power may be God’s and not from us" (1 Co 4:7).

The theme of this conference speaks of "mission in power and faith." What is meant by this use of the word ‘power?’ More specifically how, at the dawn of the 21st century, is human power related to divine power in the mission of the Church? To this question, this essay is addressed. It has three theses:

First, the empowerment of humanity through science, technology, and economic organization during the past three centuries carries an ambivalent relation to the promise of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this ambivalence has been reflected in the mission of the Christian Churches.

Second, power, in the New Testament, is the power of God. It is also, in history, the powers of this age, of the heavens, of darkness and of death. Human power is subject to the one or the other. It is almost never treated as something in itself. Christians are stewards, witnesses, martyrs, of divine power in Christ over the powers of this age; they are not subjects of power themselves.

Third, the humanist ideologies of human power, both liberal and revolutionary, have come up against their limits: limits of the environment, of economic development, and most of all, limits of hope for the future of humanity. The mission of the Christian Churches in this situation is to offer the world a responsible stewardship of such human power as is given us to realize justice and peace in this world, open to
repentance and transformation by the judgment of God over our human efforts to bear faithful witness to the divine promise in Christ.

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The relation of the vast expansion of human knowledge and power over the world around us to the promise of the gospel has been ambivalent. On the one hand J. Lesslie Newbigin is quite right in discerning a new paganism in the Euro-American society that once was Christendom. Its ideology is a form of humanist rationalism rooted in the confidence that the human mind, using the methods of scientific investigation and technological invention, can control nature for human benefit without measurable limit, that individual human interests lead naturally to the prosperity of all through free competition in the market place, and that God is at best a symbolic expression of the reason, goodness and power inherent in humanity realizing its future. This rationalism has organized the world during the past two centuries. No society has been left unchanged by it, though many have resisted. The scientific, technological and economic structures it has created are the principal powers at work everywhere, and we have not learned how to confront them or their ideology with the word of God.

This ideology has, of course, been challenged from within. It was Karl Marx who first analyzed effectively the way in which the human will to power and profit destroys society, dehumanizes its members, and builds a system of dynamic exploitation that cries out to be overturned by revolution from below. But Marx and his movement also shared the Enlightenment confidence in human goodness and power, collectively expressed, and freed from the shackle of private property and the pursuit of profit. He was more explicitly atheistic than his liberal humanist opponents because he discerned the implicit atheism of so much religion which had made its peace with bourgeois power.

Two ideologies in a power struggle, both replacing God with true humanity, and Christ with human planners as the agents of salvation and bringers of the kingdom. But this is only half the story. There is a power in the dynamics of the scientific-technological revolution that is more than human, despite the humanist pride of its agents. Arend van Leeuwen caught it a generation ago in his classic book Christianity in World History. It is the biblical revelation of the living God that first challenged every sacred structure of human thought and power, with