

the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In this Issue

Discerning Powers was the theme of this year's GOCN Consultation, held in October in Techny, Illinois. This issue includes several of the contributions made at the consultation. Lois Barrett's concluding address is the lead article here, drawing together as it did for the participants a vision for the deep and practical engagement of the powers by the church.

Liala Beukema's description of the "powers" in her local community in Chicago (p. 5) was one of two case studies on which the participants at the consultation reflected. Bill Wylie-Kellermann, who provided the other case study (from his Detroit setting), also shared insights gained from years of reflection and engagement in what he calls "An Inventory of Provoking Questions" for biblical and theological discernment regarding particular powers (p. 7).

Complementing all of these is the last in the series of articles by the editor on the resources Lesslie Newbigin gives for "Cultivating Ways of Christ in the Postmodern Transition," this one focusing on "Ways of Hope" (p. 3).

—the Editor

THE CHURCH AND THE POWERS

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I. Discerning the nature of the powers in our context

As we talk about the powers, we need to be careful about calling anything and anyone that wields power one of the "powers." In the New Testament, the powers have a character beyond individual human beings. They have a collective nature, or an institutional nature, or a political nature as well as a spiritual nature, an ethos, a continuity beyond particular individuals. Economic systems are powers. The institutions that perpetuate the myth of redemptive violence are powers. Enlightenment systems of knowledge are powers. Nationalisms are powers. Government offices are powers; the New Testament is specific in talking about rulers, authorities, thrones, and dominions as powers. The desire to have everybody around me be "just like me" is a power that results in racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism.

Thus the powers are more than just people or institutions that exercise power. The powers have a tendency to

set themselves up as the ultimate power, that is, as gods. The powers have been created by God. Although

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God has not instituted any particular government, God has ordained that there be the institution of human governments. One way to translate Romans 13:4 is that government is God's servant *when* it does the good. But governments, like other powers, want to set themselves up as the ultimate authority and to claim the authority that belongs only to God. Revelation 13 refers to the Roman Empire as the "beast."

This contrast between Romans 13 and Revelation 13 illustrates the necessity of discerning the powers.

When there is conflict or injustice, it is not enough to say, All the institutions here are powers, and life is messy and ambiguous, so we can take a stance of neutrality. Nor should we be political realists, and take our cues for how to deal with the powers from the world's standards rather than the way of Jesus.

The church is the zone where the powers are losing their control, because people have come under the reign of God. Christians have become citizens of the reign of God. The church has become the holy nation with God as its ruler, the people who pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.... For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

This gives the church the ability to discern the powers from the perspective of that allegiance given to God alone. This enables the church to discern the powers based on the standards of the reign of God, rather than the standards of the powers themselves. Ephesians 3:10 says that, "through the church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety" is to "be made known to the rulers and authorities [principalities and powers] in the heavenly places." So the church has the authority to discern what is a power and whether the power is acting according to God's purposes for it.

But a particular congregation cannot engage every power in the culture at once. So in addition to discerning the nature of the powers, a congregation must discern the nature of its own calling to witness to the powers and concerning the powers. A congregation cannot give witness concerning every power in its context. So which of the powers have turned so idolatrous that they simply must be resisted? Which of the powers have become the "beast"?

In my own congregation in Wichita, Kansas, one of the powers we have discerned as idolatrous is Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps in the city high schools. One can certainly debate the educational and ethical value of providing military

training in high schools. But it seemed crystal clear to us that Junior ROTC was setting itself up as a god when it insisted on the right of its cadets to wear swords with their uniforms—this in a school district that expels other students for carrying even replica plastic weapons to school! Junior ROTC is a power that has been distorted and has become a law unto itself. In spite of our protests, Junior ROTC and its swords have continued in the high schools, and now a form of Junior ROTC has been introduced into some of the city's middle schools.

Discerning powers such as these are an activity of the Holy Spirit in the church, the gathered community. The New Testament word that we translate "church," *ekklesia*, can mean any assembly. But the secular Greek uses of the word are often for a political gathering, a decision-making meeting. *Ekklesia* might just as well be translated "town meeting." In the Old Testament, *ekklesia* translates the Hebrew *qahal*. The primary uses of the two words are when the community of God's people is gathered for worship and for decision making.

Our congregation experienced the

Holy Spirit in our decision making very dramatically a number of years ago. We had been offered a building for little or no money. It was the right size, but the wrong location, etc. It wasn't that we had conflict concerning whether to accept the building. We just didn't know what was the best thing to do. One church meeting had not resolved the issue at all, and to make matters more complex, there was an immediate deadline for responding to the company that owned the building. So we called another meeting later that week. After a few minutes of setting out the issues, we spent 20 minutes praying in silence. At the end of that time we went around the circle, saying where we now stood on whether to accept the building. To our amazement, we were all in agreement. We were convinced that God's Spirit had been working in our discernment process.

II. Getting unhooked from the powers

In Jesus' ministry, deliverance from the powers played a large role. These powers were both internal and external to people. A clear illustration of this is the story of the Gerasene demoniac

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Cultivating Ways of Christ in the Postmodern Transition Resources for Pastoral Leaders

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In the latter years of his life, it was Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's purpose to open Western culture to a missionary dialogue with the gospel. In the course of that effort, he was essentially cultivating ways of Christ for people living in the midst of the cultural transition from a modern to a postmodern world and in what had already become a post-Christian social era. His cultivation of ways of believing, of witnessing, of being community and of living in hope anticipates the daily and weekly preoccupations of pastoral leaders sensitive to the demands of the present day. For these crucial elements in the renewal of the church, important resources are to be found in Newbigin's approach. Here the last of these elements is explored.

Ways of Hope

Another aspect of the humility which Newbigin both espouses and models lies in his sense that in the final analysis death mocks all our achievements. Hope for the future must rather be found in the distinctive way the Christian faith is rooted in history. The gospel comes in the form of a narrative that renders accessible to us the character, actions and purposes of God. The particular actions of God told in the narrative are world news, not just news for the religion page. The narrative claims that no less than the meaning of the world's life is revealed in the story whose center is Jesus Christ. His heralding of the coming reign of God shows the meaning of the story by showing its end!

Hope is not convincingly cultivated in a congregation by preaching that hope resides in the success of our efforts and the height of our achievements. Biblical visions of hope are not lodged in the actions of savvy entrepreneurs but in the actions of God against all odds. The coming reign of God that is hoped for is not portrayed in the bible as the cumulative effect of human efforts but as God's gracious gift. Faithful preaching invites us to receive it and enter it,

not try to build it.

There are deep pastoral implications if we see things this way. I remember the first time I personally encountered the impact of Newbigin's vision and the way it nourished me at a time of exhaustion and grief in the work of pastoral ministry. It was in 1980. I had just returned from an intense year of work in Kenya, working among Ugandan refugees from Idi Amin's regime. Now back in the U.S., a friend commended *The Open Secret* to me and I began to read it.

At about the same time, contact with people in the congregation I had pastored until a year and a half before made me aware that serious fracture lines were emerging in the congregation, and its unity and continued existence were threatened. I did not yet know that before long my worst fears would be realized. A division would leave a fragile remnant behind that would try for several more years to rebuild the community. But eventually it was to end in the dissolution of the congregation.

I came to the place in the book where Newbigin observed that all our greatest achievements are destined to go down into the chasm of death and become part of the rubble of history. Or if they should remain at the time of Christ's return, they will be subject to God's discriminating judgment. Ultimately, he said, our hope lies not in the quality or permanence of our achievements but in Christ who has passed through the chasm of death and come up on the other side in his resurrection. The significance of our work is not in its success or achievement but in its relationship to the risen Lord.

This redirection of hope nourished me in the midst of my fears for the congregation I had been a part of for over five years. A few years later it would console me again when the news of its death overwhelmed me with grief.

The cultivation of hope lodged in its proper place, in Christ, is desperately needed in churches living in today's success-and-achievement world. Newbigin's help nourishes the kind of hope that overwhelms the world's despair and releases the demands for performance as the basis for self-worth. It fashions pastoral leaders whose confidence is as deep as the resurrection of Christ is sure. ■

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For further reading, these brief books by Newbigin are suggested.

Sign of the Kingdom (Eerdmans, 1980)

Mission in Christ's Way (WCC, 1987)

Truth to Tell (Eerdmans, 1991)

Proper Confidence (Eerdmans, 1995)

Truth and Authority in Modernity

(Trinity Press International, 1996)

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(Mark 5:1-20). Here was a man who had unclean spirits within him, who was living in the tombs, who kept breaking out of his chains. Yet the unclean spirits were external as well. When Jesus asked the man, “What is your name?” he replies, “My name is Legion.” In a country occupied by Roman legions, his affliction was a parable for the affliction of the whole Jewish population in Palestine.

Luke 13:10-17 tells the story of Jesus’ healing the woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. The sabbath

any other effective way to practice loving accountability in the church than through relationships in small groups. Without love, church discipline becomes harsh and punitive. Without accountability, church discipline becomes nonexistent. Loving accountability happens best in relationship with people who know us and care about us and want to help us in the Christian way.

That kind of discipling in the church also helps us disengage from the powers by transforming our whole world view. The church is called to be an alternative community, a contrast society. The internal life of the church that is ruled

I do not know of any other effective way to practice loving accountability in the church than through relationships in small groups.

had been interpreted such that it no longer served its God-given intention. Through Jesus, the woman becomes unhooked from the sabbath as a distorted power. She is “set free from bondage.”

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, salvation and healing are connected. The same Greek phrase is translated differently in different passages: “Your faith has saved you.” “Your faith has made you well.” Jesus brought salvation from the power of sin and deliverance from the powers of illness, death, and possession by unclean spirits.

The accounts of the early church also recognize deliverance from the powers—deliverance from angry mobs, healing from illness, angels opening prison doors. Early baptism liturgies sometimes included exorcisms, and the *Book of Common Prayer* asked baptismal candidates, “Do you renounce the devil and all his works?” Jesus’ ministry of deliverance from evil powers has been given to the church; “as the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

Christians also unhook themselves from the powers through the act of public worship. Worship itself is a political act. The most concrete meaning of the Hebrew word for “worship” is to fall down on one’s face in front of one’s ruler. Worship is a pledge of allegiance to the one true God. Through the act of worship, we are disengaging from the other powers that claim our loyalty.

We unhook ourselves from the powers when we practice discipling and loving accountability in small groups. We cannot save ourselves from the powers. We need God’s help, and we need the help of others in the church. The discipling process, helping each other follow Jesus more nearly, enables us to see the role of the powers in our lives and to loosen their grip on our lives. Holding each other accountable in groups small enough to fit into a living room also loosens the grip of the powers on us. I do not know of

by the power of God, rather than the powers, gives integrity to witness beyond the church community.

III. Engaging the powers as a church

The church engages the powers both in the spiritual realm and in the physical realm. In the spiritual realm, the church engages the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” and the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” with the “armor of God”—truth, right relationships, proclaiming the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and especially prayer (Ephesians 6:10-20). Prayer is a powerful weapon against the powers. When we pray, it is not just a transaction between us and God. The powers are also involved, often blocking the doing of God’s will on earth. When our prayers are not answered, it may not be our lack of faith or God’s lack of attention to us; the problem may be the interference of the powers. Our prayer can be the opening through which God deals with the powers.

Our congregation and other congregations in Wichita have often held prayer vigils at the sites of drive-by shootings as a witness against local violence. This was especially the case a few years ago when the Los Angeles gangs moved in and set up their franchises in Wichita. We have held prayer services in front of City Hall when the U.S. military has been bombing some other country as a witness against global violence.

We have also engaged the powers in the physical realm. Through Mennonite Housing Rehabilitation Services in Wichita, senior citizens and the poor have had their houses repaired, or have been able to buy new houses with sweat equity. In cooperation with a neighborhood organization, the churches have reversed the abandonment of a neighborhood to commercial and industrial interests. They have given new hope to neighbors who had doubted that City Hall would ever listen to them.

In this engagement of the powers in the physical realm, the church is an instrument of the reign of God, proclaiming the reign of God by word and deed. The church is called to confront lies or ignorance with truth; to confront oppressive and broken relationships with right relationships; to confront violence with the gospel of peace; to confront unfaithfulness with faith and covenant; to confront danger, sin, and bondage with salvation and healing; to use the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God—the Word made visible in Jesus, the written word of Scripture, and the present word given by the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 2:10 says that everything will give allegiance “at the name of Jesus.” Why did God give Jesus this exalted position? Because of his suffering for the sake of the reign of God. This was Jesus’ way of confronting the powers. The church as the body of Christ, living “in Christ,” is called also to that willingness to suffer, with the hope and promise of resurrection and God’s justice, God’s final victory

over the powers.

This was the situation of the martyrs in the history of the church, suffering for the sake of the reign of God, in the hope of God’s final victory. This was the hope of two Hutterite young men from South Dakota who, because of their faith, were conscientious objectors to military service during World War I. In spite of their objections, they were sent to Fort Leavenworth and ordered to put on a uniform and carry a gun. For their refusal to do so, they were put into military prison, where they were mistreated, tortured, and eventually died. The army sent the bodies back to their families in the military uniforms they had refused to wear when alive. But because of their witness and the witness of others, during World War II the U.S. government made provision for alternative service for conscientious objectors. Their deaths were not in vain. They said no to the powers and yes to God’s reign. ■

THE POWERS AND URBAN LAND USE

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A young woman in her mid-twenties knocks gently on my door. “I hear you can get me a job,” she announces. In the past six years my pastoral duties have largely expanded from spiritual director, worship leader/preacher, and Christian educator to job counselor, literacy instructor, and employment recruiter.

The industrial flight of the eighties that took with it more than 40,000 jobs in our community coupled with the current rapid-paced, media campaign called welfare reform has confirmed what the Church of the Good News has long believed and practiced, that the work of the church is inclusive of so much more than proclaiming the spiritual ethereal reign of God and is called to open the book and proclaim that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

The community where I live on Chicago’s north side includes Lathrop, one of the city’s oldest public housing developments. In its conception, public housing was intended to provide affordable, safe transitional housing for the folks moving to Chicago to work in the growing indus-

trial market. Clybourn Avenue which links the Cabrini Green Community and Lathrop was once a booming industrial district. The public housing developments provided housing for the new workers as well as creating a network for the employers and the unemployed. Businessmen were interested in hiring from the community because of the economic benefits: security, attendance and support.

Today, in this community there are almost 3,000 residents occupying the 925 apartment units. The average income for a family of three in this development is somewhere around \$6,000 a year—for those on public assistance. Two years ago the unemployment rate was 90%. We estimate that it is a bit better because of the requirements of welfare reform. Most of the households are headed by single mothers. Lathrop is one of the few developments that is integrated. The population is somewhere around 65% African American, 20% Latino and 15% White.

Isolation has been the big factor in the life of this community almost from the beginning. In Chicago the ward system plays a key role in a community’s political power brokering. We are in some ways famous for the stories of the corrupt aldermen and women and the power they wield to

get what they want done and garner the financial goodies. When we first moved into this area the Lathrop community was divided between two wards. Half of the neighborhood was in the 32nd ward and half in the 31st ward. This decision rendered it nearly impossible for the people to leverage any power. Their involvement was never a threat to the alderman so there was no response to their cries for justice.

In the late 80's and early 90's there was a re-mapping of the wards. We were excited that they were going to unite the two parts of Lathrop into one ward. However when the dust settled we discovered that we were united, however, we were annexed into the 26th ward and cut off from the rest of that ward by the river.

In the eighties this once thriving economic area suffered disastrously. Much of the local industry followed the national pattern of fleeing our cities for "greener" pastures, i.e. foreign locations with slave level wages. In ten years we

were. We met and agreed to look into it. We surveyed neighbors for their reactions. They all agreed, it was a terrible idea for the community.

So we researched to find the owner. This was our introduction to the way the powers intersect and have their own little union. The owner of this property was an influential business man in the Korean community and he also sat as chairperson of the City of Chicago's Community Economic Development Commission. He was very resistant to our objections to this business until one day he came to show me the building and saw how well connected the church was to the residents of the neighborhood. Ultimately he backed off.

But this got us asking the question: If not this business, then what? What do we see for our community. It didn't seem right just to go around being against something. What were we for? What would we like to see? We noticed that the onslaught of residential development in the area was already visible. Land once used for job-producing industry was now

In the course of it all, we have learned that powers join hands to strengthen each other, that it is always difficult to discern the good guys from the bad and difficult not to become one of the bad ones, and that local struggle with powers that destroy community is perpetual.

lost 40,000 jobs in our community and with them a significant portion of the working class families. My neighbor's history illustrates the problem. He has been employed at four different neighborhood plants. He has never been fired from any of those jobs. Each job loss was the result of a layoff due to a plant closing.

The Church of the Good News has a long history of relationship with this community. From its inception its focus has been on the Lathrop community. It has always worked hard to respond to the needs of the community with both compassion and action. So when we began to notice that the problems in the neighborhood were getting worse and that the pressures were increasing we understood that we would have to take on a more intentional and accountable strategy for looking at some of these issues. That is when we began to explore community organizing as a means for helping us work in the neighborhood.

We sort of stumbled onto this issue of power engagement that would occupy our energies for almost four years. It had to do with land use. I was out in the neighborhood talking to business owners about community policing and one of the owners remarked that he was surprised that no one was upset about the beeper/pawn shop that was moving in. Beepers, in this kind of community, are used mostly by people in illicit drug and sex business. We were surprised because we hadn't noticed it, desensitized as we

being converted to residential use for people whose jobs were elsewhere. Loft spaces were now being converted to large housing units with huge price tags. I remember one church consistory meeting in which two members almost came to blows because one guy couldn't believe that the condos next door to the subsidized housing were selling for \$100,000.

When we learned that a large hardware distributor was planning to move out of the neighborhood, further reducing local employment opportunity, another leader and I went to visit the CEO. We questioned him about the plans for this land. At the time he said he had no plans. The land was on the market but it was difficult to find buyers for manufacturing because of the archaic building structure. After a pleasant conversation we left feeling confident that they were pursuing an economic development use for this land. Little did we know that within the next three months we would be presented with a developer's plan to convert these 18 acres of industrial land into 530 upscale housing units with price tags beginning at \$130,000.

In conversations that followed we were astounded at the lack of commitment and connection to the community demonstrated by the developer and by portions of the community. No one seemed shocked or concerned about the

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THINKING BIBLICALLY AND THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT A PARTICULAR POWER

An Inventory of Provoking Questions

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The following questions should prove helpful as guidelines for reflection. Not all may apply to a given power or your experience of it, but they may stimulate thinking.

Creatureliness: Defining a Principality

Of what variety is it? William Stringfellow thought in terms of institutions, ideologies, and images. John Yoder's categories are: religious structures, intellectual structures (ologies and isms), moral structures (codes, customs), and political structures (tyrant, market, school, courts, nation, etc.)

Does it have a "seat" of institutional power and continuity? Where is it located? Does it have a realm, a territory, a sphere of influence? Is that dominion expanding? Does it have a ruler, a person with vested office? What are its material manifestations, the rituals, symbols, and images by which its power is maintained?

Does it have a discernible spirit? an invisible aspect? a characteristic ethos? Do you recognize its "interiority"? Are people conscious or unconscious of that spirit?

What is the vocation of this power? What is its creaturely purpose, its original and best intention? How, in particular, is it called to praise God and serve human life? Who, in particular, is it called to serve? To what is it held accountable in the judgment of God?

Fallenness

Do you see where that vocation has been confused, twisted, distorted? How has an ethic of survival supplanted its calling? How does it reflect an "inverse dominion"? How do human beings make an idol of it? In what ways may it be said to usurp the place of God? Do people find meaning, identity, justification in connection with the power? How are their identities absorbed, confused, distorted? What sacrifices does it demand? In what ways are people conformed, seduced, possessed, hardened, blinded, tyrannized, or otherwise captured into its service? Are they dehumanized in other ways?

Who are the victims of this power, either by outright suffering or by demoralization?

In relation to other powers, how is it allied, bolstered, limited, or rivaled by other principalities?

How may it be said to serve death?

Living Humanly in the Sovereignty of God

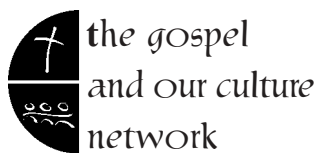
Where do you see the power unmasked and disarmed? How are its illusions, lies, and deceptions exposed? Do you know instances of human freedom in relation to it? Think of, for example, creative nonconformity, drawing a limit, resistance, refusal to be seduced, steadfast endurance, open confrontation and combat, freedom to act and serve nevertheless, conversion, escape, and such.

What tactics can you imagine for living humanly in the face of it? How is the sovereignty of God displayed here and now in relation to this power? What would render it accountable to human life?

What is the work of the church in relation to this power? How might the 'manifold wisdom of God' (Eph 3) be made known to it? What would it mean for this power to be redeemed? Can you envision its repentance—the renewal and restoration of its vocation?

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long term impact this development would have on the neighborhood. When we asked which school the children of these new residents would attend the developer calmly replied that they weren't targeting people who would raise their children in the city. They were looking for young folks starting out who would make this their first investment and then when the children reached school age they would move to an area with better education programs.

When we began to oppose this development, everyone we approached discouraged us. It was a done deal, we heard. The alderman is for it; the neighborhood groups are for it. This developer was well connected, meaning that his lawyer was a part of the same law firm as the mayor's brother. The landowner was beloved. We should reward this guy for all the years of service and generosity to the neighborhood. This was going to happen.

We plowed ahead, becoming more and more public with our objections. I remember one conversation I had later with that same CEO. After trying to convince him to change his mind he told me that it was out of his hands. The contract was signed and the next step was approval by the city. Like the owner of the beeper store, he asked me what right we had to tell him what he could do on his property. I replied that he had invited me and others in when he began the process for

the zoning change.

Through all of this, we began to observe, or perhaps name, some of the powers that fueled the ability of the developers to move in and gobble up the property. What stood out was the lack of community identity and the diminishing loyalty within the surrounding community. People had less and less of a sense that they belonged here and had a responsibility to the folks who lived next door or even down the street. I remember one afternoon running into a young professional who told me that we should do something about Lathrop before our property values went down. Here was a person with no sense of history, no concept that perhaps we had a commitment to share the benefit of our prosperity with folks who had been here a lot longer than we had.

In this case, the planned rezoning failed, due in large measure to the concerted voice of the community. But unlike David's case, when one Goliath goes down, others come quickly to take his place. In the course of it all we have learned that powers join hands to strengthen each other, that it is always difficult to discern the good guys from the bad and difficult not to become one of the bad ones, and that local struggle with powers that destroy community is perpetual. Only by the grace of God do we continue. ■