

RE-POSITIONING CENTER AND MARGIN  
IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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Richard John Neuhaus describes the essence of politics as getting, keeping, and exercising power. Every system of government both in society and in the church involves the politics of people ruling over other people: "Power...is the ability to get other people to do what you want, and not to do what you do not want. People who make their living doing that are said to govern."<sup>1</sup>

The powerful are those who create, control, rule and lead. While power is often played out in terms of forcing one's will on another's, legitimate power shares with others in mutual service. When power over others demands forced submissiveness this implies that the ideas of the powerful are superior to those of the powerless, thus alienating both groups.<sup>2</sup>

Every created person has a right to the power to express his or her self-identification and self-affirmation within God's will. The power of self-affirmation sometimes requires a change in societal structures to accommodate this power "to be." Destructive expressions of nonbeing must be confronted through the creative power of being. In this way, humans share in the power of creation: "The power to be, the courage to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (New York: Orbis, 1977), pp. 47, 48, 79.

affirm one's human dignity, must inevitably lead to the transformation of structures to fulfill its search for completion and wholeness."<sup>3</sup>

The power "to be" is a creative power with the potential to restore the structures of nonbeing in society. In this sense, power is not evil in itself. But it must be responsible, shared, and with clear limitations.

Jesus' expressions of the power "to be" had great political ramifications. When Herod heard that a baby had been born "king of the Jews," he ordered all the boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem two years and under to be killed (Matt 2:2, 16). In the end, the religious authorities handed Jesus over to Pilate "out of envy" (Matt 27:18). At his death, Jesus was mocked as "king of the Jews" (27:29, 37). Jesus' crucifixion was politically motivated through and through. The power "to be" asserted in his presence and ministry had threatened the established political and religious order:

Jesus was not only disrespectful of those in positions of authority while exalting those of low degree, but he also challenged the structures and ideology of domination that keep many persons down and give others power over them. In the Sermon on the Mount he undercut the absolute authority of a sacrosanct order and made room for the human person to emerge fully in the context of personal response to God and to neighbor.<sup>4</sup>

By giving a privileged place and calling to those without a place in society, Jesus affirmed that God accepts each human on equal terms (Matt 23:7-8). Therefore, no one can assert a self-worth to be respected while denying the self-worth others.

### 1. The False Power of Detachment

The problem of power occurs when the powerful seek self-affirmation through the outright rejection of others. In this case, affirmation of the self is achieved by separating oneself from the failings of others. "I am not those others" is a phrase used to deny the value of others in order to affirm

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<sup>3</sup> Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, pp. 49, 50, 79, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation* (New York: Orbis, 1984), pp. 50, 51.

value in oneself.<sup>5</sup> In reality, what we have in common with others is our sin, not our righteousness. The destructive false power of detachment loosens itself from all responsibility toward God and humanity, has no room for *persons*, for their dignity and their responsibility, isolates itself within the anonymity of an organization or an ideal and more and more seeks its legitimization from ideological arguments.<sup>6</sup>

Here we have come to the heart of the problem of power, impersonally expressed through oppressive structures and ideologies. Theologizing, often practiced in detachment from reality and scripture, is only genuine when done in practice and commitment. Jin-Hong Kim brought reform to the Korean church and city slums when he started "The Robin Hood Church" among the poor and oppressed in the aftermath of the Korean War. Kim contrasts the contemporary church with the historical church which has sacrificially shed much blood in its 2,000 year history, saying that the gospel spread by the poor "has become the property of the affluent." He seeks to awaken the church from ignoring and excluding the majority people of society who are poor laborers.<sup>7</sup>

No one theologizes in a vacuum; everyone theologizes in a context. Therefore, there are many different starting points in approaching the scriptures:

Why does the white theologian begin with a God who is in control of things, while the black slave starts with a suffering God? The white theologian is "in control"; the black slave is suffering. Because of their differing contexts, each establishes a different point of contact with the God of the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

The major blunder of theology through the years has been its detachment from the lives and issues of ordinary people. Pretending to be neutral, it chooses the side of the elite and partakes in the oppression of

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 214-19.

<sup>6</sup> Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Jin-Hong Kim, *I Will Awaken the Dawn*, trans. Myo Sik Park and Heran Yoo (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1991), p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) p. 21.

the poor. In fact, many times theology becomes a means for explaining away the truth rather than a means for genuinely approaching truth.

The scriptures have been cut and pasted to fit the present world order. The authentic message of the church is rendered powerless because it cannot speak prophetically against the evil social order that it embraces. Richard Mouw has charged that the church has often gone down in history as “a wasteful consumer, a discriminatory employer, an irresponsible investor, and a negligent property owner. We would all do well to keep a watchful eye on the patterns of church economics.”<sup>9</sup>

Christianity loses its authenticity when it maintains one law for itself and another for the world.<sup>10</sup> Jon Sobrino wonders, “how it is possible to be a human being and have not felt at some time the shame of belonging to inhuman humanity.”<sup>11</sup> The detachment of the church from the world is no neutral matter. It is a position that is uncaring, unloving, and unchristian. It is an arrogant abuse of power.

Augustine described history as a struggle between “the love of power and the power of love.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout church history the same struggle has taken place. The powerful people in church circles have been known to limit the flow of resources and the power “to be” thus hindering the church’s highest calling of love. While Sobrino notes that there are exceptions, he vividly illustrates the problem:

We have learned that the world’s poor are practically of no consequence to anyone—not to the people who live in abundance nor to the people who have any kind of power. For that reason the poor may also be defined as those who have ranged against them all the powers of this world. They certainly have against them the oligarchies, the multinational corporations, the various armed forces and virtually every government. They are also of no great consequence to the political parties, the universities or even the churches.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity,” in *How My Mind Has Changed*, eds. James M. Wall and David Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 158-173 (165).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Sobrino, “Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity,” pp. 163-64.

Theology passed down from the center of the church must be carefully examined, for it comes to us not from the rugged edges of real life as the biblical narratives often did, but most often from the soft center, a world timeless and detached from real life. It is no wonder that the prophets and reformers were considered deviants rather than saints.

Since suffering people of the world are far removed from the "ivory towers" where theologians and church leaders often reside, they are no longer the central concern of the church. It is time for a new reading of the Bible, interpreted in conversation with people around the world, at center *and* margins, so that all voices might be heard and understood in context rather than from a timeless and detached make-believe world of theology. Bonhoeffer set the example that the word from the church must come from a deep encounter with the present world:

The church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation. The church may not therefore preach timeless principles however true, but only commandments which are true today. God is "always" *God* to us "*today*."<sup>14</sup>

The great danger of western theology, the major theological influence worldwide, is its tendency to separate theory from practice. Strict adherence to the theological and missiological paradigms imported by western missionaries hinders the church from a relevant mission in contemporary life.<sup>15</sup> A new partnership must be created in which One-Third and Two-Thirds World Christians come together to dialogue and theologize so that they may be legitimate voices of God's work in their contexts.

A master once said to his disciples, "If one is restricted to one's heritage, one really cannot say anything and would have nothing to stand on." All people must move beyond the foundation created by their own

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, *I Will Awaken the Dawn*, p. 76. While the gospel remains eternal truth, "the vessel and method of introducing the Gospel remains unique to its people and culture," says Kim.

cultural heritage's and create their own integrated world that contains fresh insights and deeper understandings.<sup>16</sup>

Orlando Costas has pointed out that Christendom's societies divide people into "insiders" and "outsiders." The church is the legitimate religious institution from which salvation is ministered by a "sophisticated clergy-class" which observes "clearly defined rituals and practices." Furthermore, there is often an alliance between the church and other institutions of society. Those who do not fit appropriate religious traditions and the proper cultural background, he says, are the outsiders, who are for all practical purposes, lost in the wilderness. Jesus, however, shifted the definition of salvation "from benefit and privilege to commitment and service."<sup>17</sup>

This widened the horizons so that the marginalized people suddenly find a place, in fact they now take up the "privileged" role as the agents of change, illustrated in Jesus' calling of Galilean fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes. Suddenly, society's terms for greatness—powerful, master, first, ruler, adult—were radically reversed by Jesus who redefined greatness according to terms for the marginalized—servant, slave, last, child: "In God's inverted kingdom, greatness is determined by our willingness to serve. Service to others is the yardstick of status in the new kingdom."<sup>18</sup> It is also the locus of change. But how can the long-standing church hierarchy ever be reversed?

## 2. The Political Illusion

Jacques Ellul, a theologian, sociologist, lawyer, politician and militant in the French resistance of the Nazis served as Deputy Mayor in Bordeaux and as a distinguished professional in law and economics. But in his book, *The Political Illusion*, he argues that it is no simple political task to bring change to the mainstream. Ellul claims that the tragic illusion of our day is the notion that politics can solve our problems. He says,

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<sup>16</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Orlando Costas, *Christ outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), p. 189.

<sup>18</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1990), p. 243.

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A well-conducted political move can never produce anything but power—the institutions created by it are only ends or instruments of power.... The more an individual has become politicized, the more he will see and think about all problems as political problems.<sup>19</sup>

Once all problems are considered to be political problems, political action becomes the one and only recourse. This orients a person toward a basic political form of power. The more one resorts to political power, the more one gives authority to the system one is struggling against. The only problem becomes, *who is in control?* But power games will not solve the problems because the problems are too deep and wide and fixed in an omnipotent bureaucracy.<sup>20</sup>

Those caught "under the spell" of politics merely give increased power and expansion to the system in hopes that all will be solved by political action. This political solution, however, reinforces rather than alters the hierarchy. This is especially true of the bureaucracy of the mainstream church.

A bureaucratic administration cannot be anything but authoritarian, even if it has no intention of being so. It is simply necessary that the rules be applied, that the machine turn, the uncomprehending citizens obey; the public order must be maintained and public works carried out.<sup>21</sup>

The rules carried out by bureaucracy are impersonal and fixed. Personal needs or complaints fly in the face of an objective administration unable to flex on its own rules.

Ellul concludes that politics give only illusive hopes and false means toward solutions. Political recourse does not deal innovatively at structural levels because politics fall beneath the structures and serves those structures. An alternate method for bringing change is to create groups independent of the bureaucracy yet capable of rejecting its pressures, controls, and gifts, thus questioning the supremacy of the institution and the false confidence that the church is automatically the authentic

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 196.

<sup>20</sup> Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, p. 197.

<sup>21</sup> Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, pp. 157-58.

incarnation of Christ.<sup>22</sup> By organizing community beyond institutional confines, the church can rediscover its mission.

Therefore, true change comes through movements independent of the system that is embroiled in its own problems. True change must be initiated from the periphery, from those have not bought into the ideologies which justify the systems in place, the wheels in motion, the established order, the way things have always been. Transformation is found outside of the established realm and is initiated from the periphery. From the margins of the church, ideologies and clichés may be questioned and solutions postulated, as long as they are authentic movements of God, dependent in the scripture and the vision of God's reign. C. S. Song declares:

[T]he beauty of humanity and the reign of God you encounter in the midst of deprivation and inhumanity should change you from a passive observer to an active participant. It should enable you to release the power of God's reign and to struggle against the dehumanizing forces at work in human community.<sup>23</sup>

The strength of marginality is its disengagement from the established order. This disengagement provides empowerment to re-engage the church so that the center and marginalized may come together as transforming servants for change in the world. Because the church continues to buy into current ideologies which lack self-criticism, it desperately needs the witness of compassionate groups from the margins to serve as correctives:

A talk-alike, think-alike, look-alike congregation...may reflect the prevailing culture and be a club for religious folklore rather than an alternative community in a hostile or compromised environment.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, pp. 222, 231. This is my adaptation of Ellul's call for political change by creating groups totally independent of the state yet capable of rejecting its pressures, controls, and gifts, "able to deny that the nation is the supreme value and that the state is the incarnation of the nation" (222).

<sup>23</sup> C. S. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 415.

The church must come to the terms with the fact that human understanding of truth is always partial, and even the truth that we do know points to a greater truth beyond our comprehension. The church must flee from the idolatry of its truth as the only truth and admit that it is partial, tied to its own contexts and traditions; otherwise postmodern people will continue to be allergic to the present and future church.

The church will be awakened to its authentic mission once it faces the real world context of agonizing pain and oppression. This occurs when those at the center lay down their arms of tyranny and triumphalism and listen to the narratives of those on the periphery so that the established church may come face-to-face with real world contexts.

Throughout church history, flexible, mobile, renewal movements such as the Celtic communities, Pietists, Moravians, the underground church of China, the Robin Hood Church of Korea, and parachurch organizations have moved out of the center of mainstream church structures and have revitalized spiritual life and mission. These groups are often Spirit-driven, counter-cultural, enthusiastic, non-conformists, non-hierarchical, mission energized, and overall marginalized. These are the groups largely responsible for renewals, revivals and awakenings in the church, spawning social transformation and amazing mission movements.

Although these renewal movements functioned largely from the periphery, their goal or at least corollary to their goal was to renew the church center. In this sense, they were servants of the mission of God (*missio Dei*), and not subversive. Scripture teaches that there is power in the seeming powerlessness at the periphery if love is the power (Luke 6:27-36; John 17:15-19). The strength of Christian community is in its radical lifestyle that rises above the established social order.

### 3. Re-positioning the Church through the Counter-community

The church, born as a counter-community, reproduced counter-communities throughout history which kept its dynamic faith and mission alive. A counter-community is a social grouping organized around alternative norms and values. In this sense, counter-communities are separate from the world, never for their own sake, but always for the sake of mission to the world.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 133.

The “dynamic nonconformity” of the Christian community is capable of transforming church and society not only through its impact of refusing to conform to their structures and ideologies, but also through the theology in action and service that it generates. Mission is the community’s enactment of its own transformation of values outward to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup> The supernatural counter-community is the key to the healing of neurotic patterns in the social order. The counter-community provides a new socialization process with “spiritual parents and peers with whom we can identify and who exemplify the type of person we are to become.”<sup>27</sup> In stressing the need for social and political transformation, Ellul says:

... the church ought not to justify itself, or to justify the world’s solution, but it ought to find its own way, given it by God, which it alone can follow. It is only on this condition that the church will cease to be a sociological movement, and be present in the world with the effectiveness given by the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

Such a Christian witness reveals to the world its moral bankruptcy, provides hope for better possibilities, and backs it with transforming commitment and spiritual power.<sup>29</sup> This plays powerfully in church and society since domineering power tends to deteriorate when people no longer support it and instead live alternatively.

The hierarchical structures of church and society are not to be imitated by the counter-community. Jesus speaks harshly against the misuse of authority that comes from a concern for status and a proud desire for authority over others (Matt 23:1-15). Authentic Christian community is structured around mutual love and respect (Matt 23:8).

In church and society, those in power spend much of their time oiling the wheels of bureaucracy and maintaining their positions. Therefore, those at the center of church and society require the input and perspective of counter-communities to usher in fresh ideas and real-life experiences

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<sup>26</sup> Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 134 describes the Christian community is the social context for the supernatural transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>27</sup> Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard), p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 136.

from the underside. Values such as unselfishness, honesty, mutual respect, and the sense of rights and duties must be promoted beyond mere legalities and traditions. The counter-community is the truly viable agent for change.

In the case of the January 1994 uprising of the Indian people of Chiapas in one of the poorest areas of Mexico, the reason given by the rebel leader, Comandante Marcos, was, "We have nothing, absolutely nothing. Not a dignified roof, nor work, nor land, nor health care, nor education."<sup>30</sup> The Mexican government claimed that the Indians were "duped or coerced into joining the guerrilla movement."<sup>31</sup> San Cristobal Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who was partly blamed for the peasant uprising, responded,

Nobody was tricked, nobody was forced. This was caused by a society structured in a way that results in a level of poverty that brings about an almost suicidal situation.<sup>32</sup>

While the situation is politically complex and multi-faceted, no one can deny that these people in Chiapas had been indeed denied their right "to be" and their access to decision making. While from the perspective of long-suffering people the situation seems bleak and hopeless due to generations of systemic oppression, their stories and dreams for change must be brought to the center, heard and responded to in a new and positive way. Following is such a narrative:

Fear was buried next to our dead, and we carried our voice to the land of the powerful, and we carried our truth to the land where lies rule and we carried our dead to the city so as to show them before the blind eyes of our fellow citizens—to the good and the bad among them, to the wise and the ignorant, to the powerful and the weak.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Michael S. Serrill, "Zapata's Revenge," *Time Magazine* (January 17, 1994), p.33 (33).

<sup>31</sup> Juanita Darling, "Bishop Agrees to Mediate in Mexican Crisis," *The Los Angeles Times* (January 10, 1994), p. A8.

<sup>32</sup> Darling, "Bishop Agrees to Mediate," p. A8.

<sup>33</sup> Enrique Dussel, "Ethical Sense of the 1994 Maya Rebellion in Chiapas," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* (February 1995), pp. 41-56 (56).

Once we hear the stories of a community, we discover both its history and the story of God's work in that community. When we rebuff the story of a community, however, then we have refused its right "to be" and condemn ourselves in the process.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Downward Mobility: Changing Sides

In Latin American contexts in the 1950s and 1960s, many at the church center encountered the marginalized for the first time, bringing together the two in a dynamic partnership. This created grass roots communities that brought about transformation in the church and society. These counter-communities were creative responses to a succession of predicaments and challenges in the Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup>

These communities sprang up as a result of a shortage of priests which prevented many parishes from holding regular services. This crisis forced the Catholic Church to recruit large numbers of lay pastoral workers as well as United States missionaries for Latin America. To the surprise of the church, many of the missionaries "were quickly radicalized by their encounter with poverty and degradation, and began to question power structures in church and society which caused or tolerated such obscenities."<sup>36</sup>

This rediscovery of the poor in Latin America has brought about the transformational concept of *downward mobility* in mission. *Upward mobility* is a social norm which most people blindly obey without thinking twice. A new job must always have higher pay and status. A new car or home must always be bigger and better. Churches must increase their membership roles and build bigger buildings.

However, in this Latin American context, priests and nuns left their secluded areas in wealthy sections of the city and moved into the barrios. Living among the poor, they shared in their sufferings and bonded with

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<sup>34</sup> See a discussion on the role of a community's story in relation to transformational development in Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), p. 112.

<sup>35</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Theology and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1988), p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Forrester, *Theology and Politics*, p. 132.

them. Lawyers, doctors, and teachers used their professional training to serve among the poor. In so doing, many *changed sides*:

The cause of the poor has become their cause; they have shifted their loyalty from the class to which they belonged to solidarity with the oppressed.... In one country after another those who have chosen this path have been harassed and persecuted, and some of them have been killed.<sup>37</sup>

Many at the church center were awakened. Their sudden encounter with marginalized people caused them to identify with the poor. Richard Shaull refers to this transformation experience as a "second conversion" to the poor. The few who ever make such contact with the poor discover a "tremendous vitality, a strong sense of purpose in life, and a rich experience of personal fulfillment."<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, an awakening took place among the poor themselves at the base community level. They were suddenly allowed the opportunity to reflect upon their story in their reading of the scripture. They realized that the scripture speaks to them and for them in their very own contexts. Many elites, now identifying with them, no longer spoon fed them with the scripture, but put it in their hands. Suddenly, their stories mattered. Those who had come from the center of church and society heard their voices. A great reversal occurred. Elites became downwardly mobile; the poor have become empowered. The old church and the old way of life died; out of death sprang new life-giving communities.<sup>39</sup>

The counter-communities among the poor created a new quality of life in neighborhoods. People became neighbors for the first time, meeting together in small groups, becoming born again, and undergoing intense transformation. They found strength and courage to deal with daily oppression, and found new hope in their quest for justice. Support networks among neighbors and nuclear family units were re-created. The poor were thus radically changing in the way they viewed themselves and the world around them:

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<sup>37</sup> Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, pp. 123, 128.

As they read the Gospel and discuss it and pray together, they come to think of themselves as persons of worth. They develop a new sense of self-confidence as they realize that they can speak their own word and act together to change their situation. The power of the gospel working in the life of the community breaks the grip of internalized oppression, which led them to believe that they were inferior beings.<sup>40</sup>

This new power “to be” among counter-communities ushered in a counter-narrative and new way of relating based on mutual love and respect. Through downward mobility of the elites, the counter-communities become the key meeting point between the center and periphery.

Shaull’s challenge to those at the center is that they must choose to *change sides* as a starting point. A person who chooses to be “in between” is on the side of the oppressor because that person benefits from the system of oppression he or she is trying to break. Desmond Tutu once stated this eloquently:

If you are neutral in a situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has his foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.<sup>41</sup>

True loyalty to the lower class must result in disloyalty to one’s own class. To choose both sides means to compromise and never let go of oppression. Divided loyalties cause paralysis and ineffectiveness. To join the battle against social evils and to participate in the quest for a full and happy life is to participate in a system of oppression and favoritism.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, pp. 123, 124, 128. The resocialization in counter-communities has created new social models toward a better society. In a new partnership with those who have become downwardly mobile, the marginalized are now exercising power from the bottom up: “When they sit around a circle in the base communities, they are expressing visibly their break with hierarchical—or bureaucratic—organization” (125).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Bryan P. Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> “The same school system that prepared my children to move upward in society often convinces the children of the poor that they cannot get ahead. Government funds for highways, streets, parks, and other services are used more readily in wealthier neighborhoods than in the poor areas where they are most needed.” Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation*, pp. 95-97.

Many Latin American elite never imagined that once they heard the cry of the poor, they would eventually forsake their own social position and change sides. Such paradigm shifts have been the driving force behind the lives and ministries of people like Hudson Taylor, William Carey, C. T. Studd, Mother Theresa, Yu Kwan Soon, Jon Sobrino, and Jin-Hong Kim. Mission history is replete with examples.

The great miracle of Christmas was a miracle of downward mobility. By stepping off his throne and coming to earth, Jesus changed the course of history forever. Downward mobility created all new possibilities, reversing the center and margins: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). A miracle interrupts the normal course of nature. Downward mobility interrupts the accepted norm of upward mobility and thus has transforming power. Just as it was unnatural for Jesus to step down from his throne and choose downward mobility, it is unnatural for us as well. But once we choose downward mobility, we discover the power to transform the world. Jesus did not come to sanction the status quo, but to usher in an "upside-down kingdom."

God didn't just sit in a great theological rocking chair and muse about loving the world. God acted. God entered social affairs—in human form. Through Jesus, God lived and interacted in a real social environment.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Jesus entered our social world, those at the center and margins should step outside of their own social worlds and enter one another's. The margins and center come together in the life of Jesus; so do the spiritual and social worlds. The "spiritual" act of Jesus coming to the earth was a major social event which has great implications for the church and society.

## 5. Conclusion

The church too often has been characterized by aloofness and consumption rather than by sacrifice and service to the world. When preoccupied with numerical and financial figures, it easily forgets its mission to the world. The church, quite capable of putting on big

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<sup>43</sup> Kraybill, *The Upside-down Kingdom*, p. 29.

productions, is in need of refocusing its mission to a suffering and dying world. The church too often identifies with the crucifier rather than the crucified. It cannot afford any longer to keep a cold distance from the world for which Jesus came and died.<sup>44</sup>

Christians of the world are in general the richest, and this “accumulation of riches discredits the testimony of the Gospel.”<sup>45</sup> Jin-Hong Kim charges that when the church is passive toward the poor and oppressed, “it remains the maid of the status quo, and will not be spared the judgment of history.”<sup>46</sup> Calvin speaks of a great error which has prevailed throughout all ages, the error that God smiles on the rich and frowns on the poor. He said that the real reason why God permits the poor to exist is to test people and give them the opportunity to do good.<sup>47</sup> By responding to the needs of people on the periphery and bonding with them, true personal and social transformation in Christ can occur. When power is shared, church and society are transformed.

The desire for separation from the poor is anti-gospel and anti-Christ. It is abused power which refuses every person’s right of the power “to be.” No one who demands the right to be respected has the right to deny respect to others. True theology has a starting point not in ivory towers, but in the context of a harsh world. True theology occurs when text meets context, resulting in commitment not in detachment.

The forces of evil invade the cultural arena and present themselves in “consumerism, racism, sexism, militarism, nationalism, and imperialism.”<sup>48</sup> It is time for the church to face up to the “ism’s” it has embraced and to declare once and for all its independence from the patterns of this world.

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<sup>44</sup> “Two hundred years after the Enlightenment, we live in a world in which millions of people enjoy a standard of material wealth that few kings and queens could have matched then, but in which the gulf between the rich minority and the abjectly poor majority is vast and growing, a world therefore threatened as never before by destructive violence.” Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 110.

<sup>45</sup> Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor*, trans. Helen Whittle (New York: Orbis, 1970), p. 105.

<sup>46</sup> Kim, *I Will Awaken the Dawn*, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> Fred W. Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-economic Impact* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), pp. 66-67.

<sup>48</sup> Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness*, p. 88.

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Given the gravity of injustice, suffering, and spiritual depravity in the world today, it is time for Christians of the world to cease from categorizing one another and to come together in renewed partnership. Those at the center can initiate that partnership through downward mobility; meanwhile, those at the margins can be catalysts for change as they journey to the center.

Such actions might correct the shortcomings of longstanding western Christian tradition, formed while western Christendom was "an almost enclosed ghetto precluded from missionary advance."<sup>49</sup> Although the church often feels most comfortable in the shadows of its cathedrals, it is called to come forth as a light to the world.

Authentic Christianity has always challenged structures and institutions of the world and church, which are often patterned around principles opposed to God. Those at the center and margins of society and church must discover their unique quests in that challenge. Both quests find their common meeting ground in the counter-community. Within this community of partnership, both discover their true identities and roles as change agents through Jesus Christ. The counter-community empowers the marginalized to be the active witness and voice to the center. Those at the center begin to discover their mission when they shed their comfort zones and become downwardly mobile to choose the side of the suffering. This empowers the marginalized, breaking the spell of internal and external oppression. Through the counter-community, mutual empowerment leads to the transformation of the church and society.

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Marshall, *Thine Is the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 106.