Empowerment: A New Generative Theme of Christian Mission in a Globalized World

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Abstract

Facing the contemporary challenge of global capitalism, churches around the world need to consider the way they perform their mission. Three decades ago liberation movements and theologies played an important role in dealing with the negative impact of modernity that created a huge gap between the rich and the poor. It became what Schreiter calls one of 'the global theological flows.' However, we are now confronting a different kind of global reality. The very fact that all parts of the world are more and more connected because of the impact of globalization, and that in such a process of globalization the issue of power appears as a dominant theme challenges churches around the world to consider the issue of power in their mission strategy. Theologically we can find a source for constructing empowerment as a new generative theme of Christian mission in Jesus' ministry.

Introduction

Since its very beginning, the church has had an understanding of its special mission. The church understands itself as called by God through Jesus Christ to proclaim the Kingdom of God in its words and acts. Such a mission is addressed to people in their various contexts of life. Every time they face a new situation, Christian communities struggle to make clear what their mission is in the changing context. And today, we need to reckon with the changing of our world order caused by the increasing influence of global capitalism. The question is how the church understands its mission facing this new challenge.

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In our current globalized world, the problem of power distribution is an urgent issue. Tensions between peoples with economic, political, and cultural power and those who lack it — the powerless — bring our world to greater danger than ever. Global capitalism is creating small groups of people with almost unlimited power and at the same time paralyzing the mass of people without capital. The poor become more and more powerless. In turn, the accumulation of power in the hands of a few powerful people will bring our world to great danger because it will result in injustice and violence, as well as oppression and marginalization in one hand or terrorism and other destructive reactions on the other hand.

In such a situation we need to find a new way of Christian mission and theology that enables us to deal with this new world situation. One of the new ways I want to discuss here is in terms of empowerment. I would argue that the discourse of empowerment opens up a new way to cope with the problem of powerlessness of the majority of world inhabitants in positive and constructive ways. This could contribute to a church mission that deals seriously with the subjectivity of the powerless on one hand and in addressing the problem of injustice of power distribution among (groups of) people, classes, races, nations and continents on the other hand. Empowerment then can be called a new *generative theme*[1] in contemporary Christian theology and practice of mission. By this I mean empowerment as a concept can become a relevant way of speaking and performing church mission in the challenge of our new context of world order.

In this article I will do several things. First of all, I like to explain what I mean by empowerment, and then go on to show how empowerment has appeared in Christian theological debate. I will interpret Jesus' ministry to the powerless of his time as empowerment. Besides that I am going to show that empowerment has already appeared in liberation theologies as a strong motive. This paper will end with an argument to adopt empowerment as a new generative theme in contemporary theology and practice of mission.

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[1] Generative theme is a term first introduced by Paulo Freire to refer to the concept that is relevant to and discloses the whole linguistic or thematic universe of a community. This term was then adopted by Volker Küster to point out the relation among Bible stories, Christian traditions (text) and the particular human experience (context) in contextual theology. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum Publishing Company 1970, 58; Volker Küster, *Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, London: SCM Press 2001, 33-34; Mery Kolimon, *A Theology of Empowerment. Reflections from West Timorese Feminist Perspective*, Berlin: LIT Verlag 2008, 2.

Understanding Empowerment

The term empowerment has been widely used since the beginning of the third millennium. Non-government organizations, women's groups, human right activists, governments and national agencies, refer to empowerment as their aim.[2] However, there is no agreement about what exactly empowerment is. Some people understand empowerment as a process. Others see it as a strategy and still others define it as purpose or outcome. Generally it is accepted that empowerment as an idea has a close relation to the concept of power: how to understand, define and distribute power in society.[3]

The word empowerment first appeared in the civil rights movement of black people in the 1960s in the United States of America. Since then, it has been used widely. This word related to the so-called 'black power', namely a call for black people to be united, to recognize their heritage, and to develop a sense of community. The word was used as a call to define their aim, to develop their own organizations and to support those organizations.[4] The women's movement and other marginal groups then started to apply this concept intensively since the 1970s.[5] Empowerment can be understood as the language of the oppressed to claim the rights they have been denied.

There are some definitions of empowerment formulated by scholars. Nelly P. Stromquist defines empowerment as a process to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society.[6] Jane Stein describes empowerment as a strategy designed to distribute power and resources. It is a group activity dedicated to increasing political and social consciousness, grounded in a belief in the essential need for self-determination, and designed around a continuing cycle of reflection and action.[7]

In her effort to define empowerment of women, Namtip Aksornkool explains empowerment as a process in which women gain control over their

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[2] See Gaby Jacobs, *De paradox van kracht en kwetsbaarheid: Empowerment in feministische hulpverlening en humanistisch raadswerk*, Amsterdam: SWP 2001, 5; Carolyn Medel-Anonuevo and Betinna Boychnek (eds.), *Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy*, Hamburg: Unesco Institute for Education 1995, 7.

[3] Kolimon, 10-11.

[4] Wazir Jahan Karim, *Gender and Empowerment*, Wertheim Lecture Series, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam 1996, 13.

[5] Jane Stein, *Empowerment and Women's Health: Theory, Methods and Practice*, London: Zed Books 1997, 55.

[6] Nelly P. Stromquist, 'The Theoretical and Practical Bases for Empowerment', in: Medel-Anonuevo and Boychnek, 13.

[7] Stein, 1.

own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society at the international, local and household levels.[8]

Gaby Jacobs and Annemie Halsema identify three dimensions of empowerment:[9]

a. Personal. This first dimension relates to autonomy, assertiveness, the ability to help and to value one's own self. The background of this dimension is the inequality of power, oppression of women, and struggle for equality in society. When women are aware of their socialized values and their social position, they can learn to make decisions in accordance with their hopes and wishes in groups or society. The empowerment process in this dimension includes raising of awareness, strengthening of self-valuation, and developing self-competency and self-ability.

b. Social cultural. This dimension relates to interaction between individuals. In this aspect, categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, health, and social economic status play an important role. Relationships, especially, have a role here as a proponent of empowerment. Women in this dimension develop themselves in relation with other. In such relationships, women learn to think, to feel, and to act, while taking into consideration the feelings, needs and interests of other people. Empowerment as a relational and mutual process enables people to engage in a relationship and at the same time develops their relationship.

c. Political dimension. This dimension is connected to rules and laws, norms and values, images and opinions, unwritten judgments, etc. Empowerment in this dimension is seen as an effort of individuals, groups, and organizations or social movements to make changes in society, in order to make more room for individual and collective life. This dimension also relates to a critical attitude toward the prevailing rules and regulations, and to the struggle for changing of rules, norms, and values that harm. We can see this dimension in the participation of minority groups in the process of decision making in society, through legislation, mass media, etc., to strive for expression of self-identity, religious freedom, freedom to use local language, and so forth.

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[8] Namtip Aksornkool, 'Educate to Empower. An Asian Experience', in: Medel-Anonuevo and Boychnek, 53.

[9] Annemie Halsema and Gaby Jacobs, *Over kracht gesproken: Empowerment en diversiteit in zorg en welzijn*, Utrecht: Universiteit voor Humanistiek 2002, 14; see also Jacobs, 22-23.

Empowerment therefore relates to the issue of power. It seeks to understand, to define and to redistribute power. The concern of empowerment is the inequality of power between individuals or groups in society. As a concept, it addresses the injustice caused by the unequal distribution of power that benefits one and harms another. It deals with social structures, cultures and politics that oppress people. As a practice, empowerment is based on the awareness or consciousness that something is wrong with the prevailing distribution of power. Therefore it seeks to stimulate the power of the powerless to challenge the harmful structure of power and to bring justice and equality.

The subject of empowerment is the powerless. The powerless themselves — the poor, the illiterate, the indigenous, women, etc. — who must be the actors of empowerment. What we find here is not an idea of representation, but an active struggle of the powerless to change the distribution of power, resources and means. Some people, like Halsema and Jacob, refer to the involvement of other parties in the process of empowerment to support the powerless in developing their social power. It means participation of other parties is possible; however it may not replace the powerless as subjects of their own history. Participation of other parties may also point to charismatic figures, those who stimulate empowerment among the oppressed.

Personal empowerment is important but it is just one aspect of empowerment. Although empowerment relates to self-confirmation, this concept is not only connected to personal identity, but also implies the wider analysis of human rights and social justice. At the same time personal empowerment is still decisive. The whole process of challenging injustice has to be based on strengthening individual self-esteem.

I myself understand empowerment as: 'a process where the powerless come to discover and increase their personal power and to share and use their social power to challenge the prevailing unequal distribution of power and to claim their rights at all levels: personal, social-cultural, and political.'

Empowerment in Theological Debates

Though the debate of empowerment might not get enough attention in current Christian theological debates, the main point of empowerment — that is power — has become one of the important issues in Christian theology. Even from Biblical times, the question of power is decisive. The Old Testament describes power as God's and that God has shared that power with human beings when God created them (Gen. 1: 26, 28). The Old Testament

also tells us about the misuse of power by the first human beings — Adam and Eve — and later by leaders of Israel. God then sent prophets to admonish them (Amos 5: 11-12; Isaiah 10: 1-2). God takes sides with the powerless and condemns the oppressors. The New Testament, especially the gospels, gives us some depictions of Jesus' confrontation with the corruptive power of his day and of his attitude to the powerless. The liberation theologies all over the world, Latin American, African American, Minjung, Dalit, etc., then reflect on the power of God and the power of human beings facing the oppressive situation they struggle with.

In this section I want to focus on two things to investigate how power and empowerment are dealt with in Christian theology: Jesus' attitude to (political and economic) power and the powerless of his time, and the motive of empowerment in liberation theologies. In order to understand Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed, I utilize the social-historical approach offered by New Testament scholars like Gerd Theißen, Luise Schottroff, Wolfgang Stegemann, Ekkehard Stegemann, Bruce Malina, Richard A. Horsley, K.C. Hanson, Douglas Oakman, Klaus Wengst, Halvor Moxnes, and William R. Herzog II. This is meant to understand who the powerless were in Jesus' time and how Jesus addressed them in the social-historical situation of that time.

Jesus and Empowerment

Jesus' ministry as witnessed by the gospels could be identified as an act of empowerment. Jesus clearly took sides with the powerless of his time. The social-historical condition of Jesus' time was characterized by colonization of Rome, heavy burden of both state and religious taxations, the collaboration between the religious elite and the Herodian family and Roman power, and the big economic gap between the noble (elite) and the common (non-elite) people.

Jesus and Political Empowerment

Politically the Palestinian Jews in Jesus' time were under the colonization of Rome, which conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE under the leadership of Pompey. Even though Hyrcanus was installed as chief priest and ethnarch,[10] polit-

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[10] Ethnarch literally means 'a ruler over a people' (Greek ethnarches). It was a status lower than client-king, however it was higher than tetrarch. See K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*, Minneapolis MN: For-

ical power was in the hands of Rome.[11] From 37 to 4 BCE, Herod got power to rule as 'King of Judea'. He was a converted Jew with an Idumean family background. According to Josephus, his passion for building made the Palestinian Jewish people of Jesus' time become poor.[12] Besides that he ruled with an iron fist to gain political stability. Therefore he was not popular among the Jews. After his death his kingdom was divided into four parts among three of his sons and his sister, Salome.[13] Galilea, the home-country of Jesus, was under the government of Antipas. He was the one who was called a fox by Jesus and who jailed John the Baptist and then ordered him killed. Judea was first ruled by Archelaus, one of Herod's sons. But then he was discharged and expelled by Caesar Augustus in 6 CE. And since then Augustus made Judea one of the procuratorial provinces with Caesarea as the main city. In Jesus' time, the governor/prefect of Judea was Pilate who ruled for 10 years from 26 to 36 CE.

The Roman Empire in Jesus' day was described as 'the best and happiest period in world history'. It was claimed that peace was the most decisive sign of that period. However, that peace was peace with bloodshed.[14] In order to maintain its power, the Roman Empire did not hesitate to use coercion. The local political leaders in Jesus' time were also corrupt. The sons of Herod tended to seek praise from the Roman emperor and at the same time burden the Jewish people with many kinds of taxes in order to finance their bureaucracy and political interests.

Facing authoritarian political power, many resistance movements emerged among the Jews. In such a situation Jesus' activities can be understood as a unique model of exercising power. He chose to diminish and limit the coercive power of the powerful while at the same time he stimulated the powerless as agents of a new kind of power. In the synoptic gospels, we do not find any open confrontations between Jesus and the Roman authorities. It is true that Jesus was executed by a Roman authority, the prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, and that he was accused as a subversive. However the gospels do not tell any story about an open conflict between Jesus and Rome before the last

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tress Press 1998, 172; H. Jagersma, *Dari Aleksander Agung Sampai Bar Kokhba: Sejarah Israel dari ± 330 SM – 135 M* (From Alexander the Great to Bar Kokhba: The History of Israel from ± 330 BCE-135 CE), Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia 2003, 164.

[11] See Hanson and Oakman, 82-84.
[12] *Antiquities* 117. 205, 308 and *War.* 2, 85.
[13] Hanson and Oakman, 82-83.
[14] Cf. Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1987, 7-10.

week in Jerusalem that resulted in the crucifixion. The gospels' view is that the Jewish authorities were the main agents and downplay the role of the Romans.[15] There is no doubt that Jesus' attitude to this foreign power was different, for instance, from the attitude of the Zealots.[16]

This does not mean that Jesus was apolitical. Some gospel texts tell us his critical words to the political powers. One example of Jesus' political teaching is obvious in his response to the question of the mother of John and James who asked for sharing power of Jesus for her sons (Mark 10: 35-44). Jesus told his disciples,

> You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10: 42-44).

Obviously, the political power to which Jesus referred was the Roman authority. The *Imperium Romanum* was in its golden age in Jesus' time. The Roman emperor claimed himself as the world peacemaker; there was no war; art and culture developed; many new cities were built; and the same law was applied everywhere. However, to gain the victory and to keep the peace, the military played the most important role. This was actually a history of violence, not a

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[15] On the different parties involved in the accusation and execution of Jesus, and on the bias of the sources, see Theißen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press 1998, 449-466.

[16] There is a difference of opinion among New Testament scholars about the relation between Jesus and the Zealots, i.e. the armed band that struggled against Rome. S.G.F. Brandon argues that even though Jesus was not a member of the Zealots, he and his disciples were sympathizers of the ideals and goals of the Zealot movement, as too were the early Christians. J.P.M. Sweet, on the contrary, points out that Jesus came from Galilee where people joined the revolt against Roman taxation in 6 CE. Additionally one of Jesus' disciples is called 'the Zealot'. Nevertheless it does not prove that Jesus shared the goals and ideals of the Zealots. See J.P.M. Sweet, 'The Zealots and Jesus', in: Ernst Bammel and C.D.F. Moule (eds.), *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984, 1-9. I agree with the opinion developed by Gerd Theißen. According to Theißen there was similarity between Jesus and the Zealots. They shared the same conviction that the bad situation could be changed. However, their way was different: Jesus stressed non-violent action, whereas the Zealots did not hesitate in using violence to achieve their goals. See Theißen, 'The Political Dimension', in: Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theißen (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1982, 132. Moreover, Theißen argues, early Christianity had begun as a renewal movement in Judaism started by Jesus. It was not intended as a revolution against Roman authority. See Theißen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985, 1.

history of peace.[17] Surely the critiques of Jesus were directed to such a coercive power.

In the Graeco-Roman world, the rulers (οι μεγαλοι = the great ones) were those who ruled over others (κατακυρευειν = lord it over others). Their glory was identical with coercive power. The greater the power you gain, the better you will be.[18] Jesus rejected this model of leadership. 'But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.' Here he used two words: διακονος and δουλος. Διακονος is one who waits at the dining table. S/he works and serves with hospitality and friendliness. A δουλος has even lower status than a διακονος. Herman Beyer gives some explanations about these words. Δουλευω means to serve as a slave, with a stress on subjection. Διακονεω has the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another. In the verb διακονεω there is a stronger approximation to the concept of a service of love.[19]

What does it mean when Jesus uses the image of service of διακονος and δουλος as a better alternative leadership model? D.A. Carson was right when he said that Jesus' ethic of leadership and power in the community of his disciples was revolutionary.[20] From what we hear about these words of Jesus, we can conclude that for Jesus, ruthless and violent leadership was not an ideal kind of leadership. Moreover, Jesus demanded repentance from this pyramid of power: whoever wants to receive a higher position must be a διακονος, even δουλος, of all.[21] Here we see Jesus invoke another kind of power. He rejected the exercise of power by force. Rather he idealized a power without coercion and compulsion; that is, to rule by service. This is a paradoxical way of dealing with power. It is not about domination and control but about creating goodness and justice for all. Jesus' concern is not for power in the hands of the powerful, but about empowering the powerless to become agents of the Kingdom of God.

In his teaching of the Kingdom of God, Jesus identified himself as one who brings good news to the oppressed. Moreover he explained his mission as directed to the poor. In his answer to John the Baptist who asked whether

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[17] Wengst, 10.

[18] Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8: 27-16: 20*, Nashville: Nelson 2001, 118.

[19] Hermann W. Beyer, διακονεω, in:, Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 2, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1964, 81.

[20] D.A. Carson, 'Matthew', in: Frank E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 8, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan 1984, 432.

[21] Stegemann, *Injil dan Orang-orang Miskin*, Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia 2000, 37.

or not 'he is the one who comes', Jesus indicated how important the poor were in his ministry: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matt. 11: 5). According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus even started his ministry by using the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying that his task was to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4: 17-19).[22]

In his 'sermon on the plain' (Luke 6: 20-26), Jesus clearly said, 'Blessed are the poor because they are the owners of the kingdom of God' (Luke 6: 21). The word for poor which is used here is οι πτωχοι. This word refers to the completely destitute people. They are called blessed, μακαριος, which means 'the happy, untroubled state of gods, and then more generally the happiness of the rich who are free from care.'[23] To the very poor people of his day, Jesus promised such happiness in the Kingdom of God. The promise by Luke is described in the present form of εστιν alongside an ensuing sense of the future. Jesus ensured them that the kingdom is so close that it can be experienced now.[24]

Gerd Theißen, therefore, argues that Jesus' preaching of God's kingdom was especially beneficial to the powerless. He explains this by showing the crucial relationship between the metaphor of kingdom and the metaphor of Father in Jesus' teaching.[25] The term Kingdom of God (*malkouth, meloukah, mamelakh*) in the tradition of Judaism does not only mean 'realm', namely an area where a king rules, but it also means 'reign', i.e., the reality that he rules. So, kingdom in Judaism always means kingship as well.[26] Theißen argues that this is precisely what was lost in the king imagery in Jesus' teaching. In Jesus' teaching, the king metaphor was dropped and the kingdom metaphor was extended. This created a hole. The king metaphor then changed to the father metaphor. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray 'Let your kingdom come' what he meant was the Father's kingdom. It expresses a special relationship between human beings, especially the powerless, and God. The relationship

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[22] Cf. Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the* Gunung Mulia 2000, 37.
    Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church, Geneva: WCC 1977, 13.
[23] I. Horward Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1978, 248.
[24] Marshall, 250.
[25] Gerd Theißen, 'The Ambivalence of Power in Early Christianity', in: Cynthia L. Rigby (ed.), *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine. New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, Atlanta GA: Scholar Press 1997, 25.
[26] Theißen, 'The Ambivalence', 25. See also, A.I. de Graaf, *The Kingdom of God in the Preaching and Work of Jesus*, Potchefstroom: University for Christian Higher Education 1976, 1.

now is between the Father and his children. Moxnes, in the same line of thought, argues that Jesus did not speak of the kingdom of God in imperial pictures, but in the image of households, with God as housefather.[27]

In the kingdom of God that Jesus preached, the children of God had a privileged position. They were participating in God's kingdom. They belonged to the ruling family. By preaching about the kingdom of God to the power-less, Jesus challenged the political system of his time that marginalized the poor. The poor and common people in the kingdom of God that Jesus preached about not only get benefits from God's kingship, they also become citizens of God's kingdom. Moreover they become members of the ruling family. The poor exercise 'power' in God's kingdom. They do not belong to the powerless anymore. Theißen says: 'The narrative of Jesus of the gospels confronts the political system of power with a conception of political power which promises to the powerless access to power in the *familia dei*.'[28] This power is unique: 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all' (Mark 10: 44).

If Theißen is right, then Jesus' preaching of God's kingdom must be under-stood as empowerment of the powerless. It includes personal empowerment that strengthens the self-esteem of the powerless. The kingdom of God preached by Jesus proclaims their new status as human beings with dignity. This preaching would also inspire them to develop social networks as God's children to seek for a more equitable social system. The kingdom of God itself can be understood as the realm where equality and justice are the domi-nant norms and values.

Jesus and Economic Empowerment

According to Stegemann and Stegemann,[29] Palestinian Jews in the first cen-tury under Roman authority were divided into two social strata: the elite and the non-elite. Each of these groups was divided further into two smaller groups. The elite group included: (a) the provincial aristocracy: Herodian ruling house, priestly and lay aristocracy, members of the Sanhedrin; and (b) administrative and military retainers, functionaries, priests, scribes, local

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[27] Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*, Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2003, 157.

[28] Theißen, 'The Ambivalence', 27.

[29] Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement; A Social History of Its First Century*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press 1999, 129-136.

judges, chief tax collectors, foreign traders, and wholesalers. The non-elite groups included small farmers, tenants, traders, ordinary tax collectors, businessmen, day laborers, fishermen, widows, orphans, shepherds, prostitutes, beggars, and bandits.[30]

These social economic strata indicate an unequal distribution of social power. Stegemann and Stegemann show that social power is formed based on power through position (office or role) and power through property (influence). Based on possession or control of the surplus that society produces, the elite gain control of power. On the other hand, the poor are exploited by the economic system and live in a hopeless situation.

There was a big economic gap between the noble (elite) and the common (non-elite) people. The economic resources of the elite came from ordinary people through various kinds of religious and state taxes. The elite (probably) lived in the cities, but owned much property in the countryside that was managed by their slaves and other people dependent on them. Besides that they had many trading activities like export and import businesses and money rentals. The common people's life became harder because of the many kinds of taxes they had to pay.[31]

The gospels use the word πτωχος which means destitute to describe the reality of poverty at that time. This word refers to the unemployed day laborers, the runaway slaves or criminals, the homeless people, etc. (Luke. 3: 11, 16: 20; Matt. 25: 35f; Luke 6: 20). It indicates a family who was driven out from their land because of debt, disease, or death and must live as beggars in an impoverished condition. This kind of poverty was widespread in all of Rome's regions of authority. Another word used by the gospels to describe

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[30] Another opinion is held by Hans Ruedi Weber. He argues that the Jews in Jesus' time were socially and economically divided into three classes. First, the upper class that included occupants of the palaces, the big traders, the landowners, the bankers, the members of the Sanhedrin, and the families of the chief priest. The middle class included small traders, small farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, the Levites, and priests. Third were the poor. This class was divided in two groups. One group of the poor was still able to making a living, like slaves and day laborers. Their salary was one denarius every day. Their life was burdened by various taxes and rents that trapped them in many debts. The other group of poor was totally dependent on donations. They were beggars whose lives hinged on charity as arranged by the Torah. See Weber, *Power: Focus for a Biblical Theology*, Geneva: wcc Publications 1989, 14. This argument is also supported by Hortensius Mandaru ofm, *Solidaritas Kaya Miskin Menurut Lukas* (Solidarity of the Rich and the Poor According to Luke), Yogyakarta: Kanisius 1992, 42-43.

[31] Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*, Maryknoll ny: Orbis Books 1986, 9; Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 113-123; Hanson and Oakman, 114.

poverty is πενες (Luke 21: 2). The intensity of this word is less than the word πτωχος. The word πενες was applied to a poor person who must work very hard as long as s/he lives.[32]

Two texts from the gospels can be seen as examples of Jesus' attitude to the exploitative economic system of his time. The first one shows his response to a question of a young rich man (Mark 10: 17-27). Even though Jesus received him and talked to him, and even 'looked at him and loved him' (verse 21a), Jesus' answer to his question about eternal life disappointed him. This pericope implies that facing a big economic gap between the rich and the poor of his time, Jesus asked the rich man to do justice to the poor. There was an accumulation of possessions of the elite on one hand, and on the other hand the poor were completely exploited. The rich usually got their possessions through exploitation of the poor. Maybe the rich got their wealth legally; nevertheless, the legal, political, and economic systems of that day were corrupt and repressive for the poor.[33] Hence, for me what Jesus meant here was not only a spiritual teaching, but also had political and economic implications. Jesus not only demanded this rich man to show his charity to the poor, but to give back what was actually theirs. Here we encounter Jesus' concern for justice. Moreover he advocated an alternative kingdom of God network through an exchange of goods organized by a generalized reciprocity principle.

Jesus then taught the poor to expand an alternative economic system based on reciprocity. In his parable of 'the friend at midnight' (Luke 11: 5-8), we can see this vision. Many interpreters argue that this parable is rooted in the customs of hospitality. It is normal for a villager to wake up his/her neighbor for help. Besides that, although the guest arrives at midnight, the host is still obligated to serve proper food.[34] The host can freely ask help from neighbors because hospitality is a requirement for all members of the village, not only for the host. The honor of the village is important. Therefore the host can go

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[32] John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus. A Revolutionary Biography*, San Francisco: Harper, 61; Schottroff and Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope*, 16.

[33] See Annette B. Merz, 'Mammon als schärfster Konkurrent Gottes — Jesu Vision vom Reich Gottes und das Geld', in: S.J. Lederhilger (ed.) *Gott oder Mammon*, Frankfurt am Main *et al.* 2001, 34-90, for a detailed analysis of Jesus' perception of the destructive role of money and his alternative model of living beyond mammocracy in the kingdom of God.

[34] William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as the Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1994, 198.

to his/her neighbor to ask for help. Every diner serves two or three pieces of bread. A villager's contribution to the host is not a loan, but a direct gift.[35]

The norm in the moral economy of the peasant is reciprocity. With this norm peasants or village members can rely on each other in their difficulties. Herzog explains it in this way: 'Reciprocity meant that every peasant family was guaranteed a minimal subsistence from the resources of the village and could press a claim to the village's resources to the degree that its reserves could cover the needs…If a village neighbor asked for help, one always agreed to help because by doing so, one obligated the neighbor to reciprocate when the situation was reversed. When any family's subsistence was in jeopardy, it could stake a claim to the resources of the village.'[36]

As mentioned above, the money economy introduced by Rome shifted the system of reciprocity (exchange of goods) among the peasants. That foreign economic system trapped the Jewish peasants in a hierarchical relationship between patron and client. Moreover, they were tricked into poverty created by an exploitive system. Many peasants lost their land because of the extension of great estates and marketization of the economy. This economic change influenced peasant households as a social group. The old solidarity of a big family could no longer function. This brought a crisis because the authority structure of the family and village could no longer be maintained.[37]

There are three kinds of reciprocities. First, negative reciprocity categorized by taking away without giving anything in return. This characterized the type of relationship between the powerful and poor peasants. Second is balanced reciprocity in which one expects a prompt return. This characterizes relationships between groups and persons who are on an equal level with each other (Luke 14: 12-14). Third, general reciprocity is typical of the exchange between persons in a close relationship, especially within the household.

The increase of economic pressure made the theme 'friendship' understandable. Friends and relatives were people the peasants could rely on for cooperation. Halvor Moxnes calls friends and friendship as 'fictive kinship'.[38] Relatives and family are kin, but friends are fictive kinship.

The Jesus movement, according to Herzog, established a network of fictive kinship. In Mark 3: 35 Jesus said: 'For whosoever shall do the will of God,

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[35] Herzog II, 201.
[36] Herzog II, 205.
[37] Moxnes, 150-151.
[38] Moxnes, 152.

the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.' The emergence of fictive kinship can be seen as a response to the economic pressures of the day. The elite family and their interests controlled the life of the poor. Jesus' vision highlighted the situation. And he did it in an understandable way. He offered an alternative to the exploitive political economy by proclaiming the reign of God. He showed that in the political economy of his day, many were losers. The reciprocity model developed by the Roman authority was a negative one. On the contrary, Jesus urges a transformation of reciprocal relationship to become a pure gift among his followers. The ultimate example of this pure gift is the mercy of God as their Father.[39]

Instead of the exploitive Herodian society, Jesus envisioned God's household as one with many brothers and sisters. The household of God is not based on blood relationships, but on 'fictive kinship' mentioned above.[40]

This parable, in my opinion, is Jesus' potent criticism of the political economy of his day. At the same time this parable also presents an alternative vision for human relationship. This alternative of Jesus is based on an expression of aspiration and interest by the powerless. Facing the exploitive economic system, Jesus called his followers to develop solidarity and to begin practicing an economic alternative based on reciprocity. Here the vision of the kingdom of God that is pictured as the household of God becomes the foundation for the powerless to support each other as God's children. This is a form of empowerment. When the powerless recognize their strength (power) in solidarity, they are able to develop resistance against the oppressive political economy.

Empowerment and Liberation Theologies: A New Generative Theme

After interpreting Jesus' ministry as empowerment, I am going now to discuss the relationship of liberation (theologies) and empowerment. I would argue that even though the word empowerment is not always used explicitly in the liberation theologies, the problem of power distribution lies at the core of all liberation theologies.

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[39] Herzog ii, 208; Moxnes, 156-157.
[40] Hanson and Oakman, 126-127; Douglas E. Oakman, 'Money in the Moral Universe of the New Testament', in: Stegemann, Malina and Theißen (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus*, 347.

Empowerment and Liberation as Discourses

The issue of power lies at the core of an oppressive situation. Oppression is about misusing power for the advance of an individual or a group in a way that harms others. The unequal social power distribution brings accumulation of power for some and injustice for others. Oppression makes people become strangers to their own potential and fail to imagine any other way of organizing society or their personal lives. Therefore the liberation process must include empowerment. It must address the question of how power is understood, used, and shared in a certain context. Furthermore the effort of liberation must be based on the increasing power of the oppressed in individual, social, and political levels. Through conscientization, the oppressed people come to unmask the systemic injustice in their society and rediscover their power to challenge the prevailing unequal distribution of power and to claim their rights at all levels. Here the role of intermediaries, including theologians, is inevitable but it must not replace the oppressed as subject of their own history. The success and sustainability of a liberation process is mainly influenced by how far the process is steered by the oppressed themselves.

Empowerment will still be important in a post-oppressive society. Perhaps at some point we will say we do not need liberation anymore; maybe liberation is not an agenda any longer in a society that has succeeded in its fight against tyranny. However, empowerment still needs to become an agenda in order to guarantee that the new power arrangement will not be misused anymore. Empowerment therefore must be more than individual empowerment. It must include the developing of a fairness system that ensures justice for all. In this sense empowerment is both a process and strategy.

Empowerment as New Generative Theme

Liberation theology is widely known. Based on direct engagement with liberation movements, this theology emerged as a critique to the concept of development. In the Latin American liberation theologians' view, development did not touch the root problems of society. It was more related to economic growth and at the same time made the poor countries increasingly dependent on the rich nations. The Latin American liberation theologians therefore spoke of liberation instead of development. By liberation they meant the struggle to challenge and change the unjust social structures that destroy people and crush the aspirations of the oppressed social classes.

Liberation theologies have since become one of the so-called 'global theological flows'.[41] However, as shown by Schreiter, this theology is now facing a context which differs widely from the situation in the 1960s and 1970s. The end of socialism and the increasing influence of capitalism present a different challenge to doing theology. Many argue that now is not the time to speak of liberation anymore. Facing the new change, a different kind of commitment is needed. There must be a new theological image instead of liberation.

I identify empowerment as a new generative theme that needs to be dealt with in the present context of change in our world order. What I mean by a generative theme here is in the sense used by Paulo Freire and Volker Küster. It refers to the dominant concepts in certain contexts that are relevant to and disclose the thematic universe of a community.[42] Facing the authoritarian way of using and managing power employed by their rulers, the oppressed people in many contexts speak of the need to strengthen their personal and collective power in order to struggle for a more equal and just society. Furthermore, because of the increasing power of global capitalism, many people all over the world are suffering from powerlessness. Global capitalism is creating some groups of very rich people and at the same time contributing to the paralyzing of many more (groups of) people in the world. In such a context empowerment is emerging as an inevitable necessity. As a theologian, I am convinced that we need now to take account of empowerment in our theology and God-talk. Christian tradition, especially the Gospels, as I have shown, implies empowerment as also a generative theme. Facing the oppressive context of his time, Jesus' ministry can be identified as empowerment. In order to strengthen my argument of empowerment as a new generative theme, I want to show two things: the relationship between liberation theologies and empowerment, and the praxis of empowerment in church ministry.

Liberation Theologies and Empowerment

At the first place we need to accept that there is a motive of empowerment in liberation theologies. However, even though empowerment has its roots in liberation movements and theologies, empowerment has its own procedure. As two different discourses, empowerment and liberation apply different approaches. Liberation movement emphasizes a class approach. The poor are

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[41] Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2002, 15-18.

[42] See above.

seen as a group or a class of society. Liberation is therefore a class struggle. Of course, one can argue that the general 'order of salvation' in the liberation gospel is: personal empowerment through conscientization leads to collective empowerment, which leads to social transformation. However it got things out of balance, by focusing on macro analysis at the expense of personal transformation.

Empowerment theory on the contrary starts from the personal level. Collectively is not denied in empowerment debate, but that collectivity must be developed from individual enablement. On this point, empowerment, more than liberation theology, addresses the issue of identity.[43] Empowerment refers to the fact that injustice or oppression has not only to do with political and economic issues, but it also harms one's cultural identity by legitimating cultural prejudices. Empowerment therefore deals with the issue of power relationships in cultural encounter as well.

At the same time, it must be accepted that both empowerment and liberation share some common features: goals, subject, and issues. Both liberation and empowerment discourses emphasize social justice as their goals. They both also stress the importance of the poor/the powerless as subjects of the struggle. Moreover, both liberation and empowerment movement address the problem of poverty, injustice, powerlessness and marginality.

As I already mentioned the liberation process needs to include empowerment. It is because liberation deals with the oppressive situation where power is misused for the benefit of a few at the expense of many others. It is meant both to criticize unfair social power distribution and to increase the power of the oppressed individually, collectively and politically. Empowerment is so fundamental in the liberation process that even the outcome of liberation is determined by how far the liberation process is steered by the oppressed themselves. Only when the oppressed are empowered to become subjects of the liberation process, will the liberation process be both successful and sustainable. More than that, the discourse of empowerment will still be needed in a post-tyrannical society. When the liberation process succeeds, empowerment must still work to guarantee that the new power arrangement will not be misused again.

In liberation theologies the issue of power gets wide attention. All the liberation theologians agree that power is important in the liberation process and that the oppressed need to reclaim their power for liberation. However they reject the oppressive power practiced by their corrupt leaders. Rather

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[43] Cf. Küster, 194.

they refer to God's salvific power. In the paradoxical power of God — strong but weak, weak but strong — they come to discover their own power for liberation. God's power is known in God's impotency and helplessness. In Jesus' cross God's helplessness is revealed. It is also a confirmation that God's power is not corruptive because God did not use power to take revenge. At the same time it proves God's nearness to human beings in their suffering. God is actively present in the struggle of the oppressed for liberation, but that presence does not mean to take over their responsibility to fight for their liberation. 'God liberates and does not always liberate.'[44] In interaction with God the oppressed still need to become subjects of their own liberation.

In their Christology, most liberation theologians place more emphasis on the historical Jesus than on the Christ of faith.[45] For them there is a parallel relationship between the oppressive situation where Jesus lived and their own contexts. Furthermore in such a context Jesus absolutely identified himself with the poor. He was always surrounded by the crowd (ὄχλος) who are mainly the despised ones in society. To them he proclaimed a new hope that is the kingdom of God. Jesus made very clear that the kingdom of God belongs uniquely to the poor.

In the context of oppression and injustice, the liberation theologians speak of a 'theology from below', that is from the perspective of the oppressed.[46] Dealing with the abuse of power that brings injustice, these theologians struggle to redefine power. They all agree that power is important in the liberation process and claiming power for the oppressed is inevitable for the accomplishment of a genuine liberation process. However, they emphasize another kind of power, the salvific power of God, rather than the oppressive power practiced by their corrupted leaders. Additionally, in their reflection on a God who takes sides with the oppressed they also criticized theological teachings of the church that tend to paralyze people's power. Rather they reinterpret such doctrines in such a way as to contribute to the liberation and empowerment of the poor. Finally, some of them come to deal with the sources of empowerment in cultures and other religious traditions outside Christianity.

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[44] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1993, 199; cf. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1987, 153.

[45] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, London: SCM Press, Ltd. 1978, 9-14.

[46] See Arvind P. Nirmal, 'Toward a Christian Dalit Theology', in: A.P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras 1991, 63-64; Chung Hyun Kyung, 'Following Naked Dancing and Long Dreaming', in: Letty M. Russel (ed.), *Inheriting Our Mother's Garden. Feminist Theology in Third World Perpsective*, Louisville: The Westminster Press 1988, 63-70.

They speak of empowerment in one's own culture and empowerment of the culture itself.

Empowerment in Church Mission

The discourse of empowerment also brings us to think about the relationship between 'old churches' in Europe and their 'younger churches' in the former mission field. We all agree that the claim of independence and identity of the former 'younger churches' do not have to mean the end of their relationship. What must be changed is the way of perceiving the relationship. Instead of regarding it in terms of superiority-inferiority or 'original-copy', the new relation must be characterized by mutual appreciation, equality and solidarity networks between them.[47]

In my opinion the present relationship between churches needs to reckon with the influence of globalization, because globalization affects all dimensions of human life in the whole world. It is not only that industrial laborers in Jakarta and Seoul who are suffering the impact of global capitalism, but also the Dutch farmers and people of the United States.

The spread of a Western — especially an American — way of life via mass media, the internet, etc. has created a global culture. This global culture has increasing power to influence many people all over the world. Because of the influence of television and internet we are sharing now common life style and way of thinking. At the same time, we also witness a new emphasis on ethnicity, cultural minority rights, and regional self-determination.[48]

In the economic realm, globalization relates to the increasing power of capitalism after the collapse of socialism as an alternative economic system. What is now called neo-liberal capitalism extends around the world. The neo-

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[47] Cf. Pieter Holtrop, 'Herdacht Landschap. Over de Zending and haar Wetenschap' (Rethinking Landscape. About Mission and Its Science), paper presented as farewell speech, at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Kampen, May 2005. In this paper Holtrop argues for a two-way traffic between religious and cultural encounters in this era of the so-called Empire, that is the emerging tendency of a new global order that tries to rule over the whole world.

[48] Cf. Carol C. Gould and Pasquale Pasquino (eds.), *Cultural Identity and the Nation State*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2001; Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity & Global Process*, London: Sage 1994; Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World. How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*, London: Profile Books 2002, 13; Sandra Braman, 'Interpenetrated Globalization. Scaling, Power and the Public Sphere', in: Sandra Braman and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (eds.), *Globalization, Communication and Transnational Society*, Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press 1996, 27; Schreiter, 12.

liberal principles of economic globalization are applied by groups who benefit from economic globalization as a global prescription for all. However, in reality, not everybody profits from it. There is an increasing gap around the world between some who benefit from it and many who are left behind by it. Financial speculation along with fluctuating currency values have proved to be devastating for poor countries like what happened in Asia in the 1990s.

Our question now is how can we imagine the best relationship among churches in this time of globalization? From the perspective of empowerment I want to suggest that the relationship between churches in this time of globalization must consider the unfairness of our present world order. The churches in the Western countries have become part of world communities that benefit from the globalization process. At the same they are also victims of the new world order. Many people in the West are also suffering because of the impact of global capitalism. The same fact is true for the majority members of churches in the so-called Third World nations. They are suffering from the negative impact of global capitalism as well. Many of us are undergoing the pain because the distribution of world prosperity is still unfair. In other words we all live in a sick world. We all suffer. But at the same time we need to identify the power within ourselves that can support us in our survival. It is important to understand the fact of the condition of our world but then still we need to recognize the capability God gives us in order to participate in the shalom of this world.

In terms of empowerment we need to find ways where the service of the church at a global level will present an alternative political, economic, and cultural world order. The diaconal projects of the churches, for example, need to address this reality of unequal power distribution and adopt empowerment as both its process and aim. What we need to consider seriously is how far these church diaconal projects are on one hand challenging the unfairness of the political and economic world order and on the other becoming a kind of 'power sharing' among these churches and with the powerless. We learn from Jesus who was very aware of the unfairness of power distribution of his time. By preaching the kingdom of God, healing the sick and teaching the powerless, his service became a threat to the civic order of his time. At the same time he shared his power with the powerless and engaged in an empowerment process. As ecumenical communities we need to utilize and to renewing our facilities, structure, and network to cope with the negative impact of global capitalism and to serve the world.

Closing

The challenge of globalization today forces us to do our church mission in new ways. Especially facing the negative impact of the global economic system and the increasing fact of injustice and poverty around the world, we need seriously to consider the issue of power in our missionary strategies. The inspiration we get from Jesus Christ can become a way of dealing with it. We are called to witness the solidarity of God with the powerless that aims to empower them in order to become active agents of God's kingdom. In this sense, empowerment needs to be considered as a new generative theme of Christian mission in a globalized world.

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