

Session Two: Christian Theology/Church History
 THE CHURCH AMONG THE POWERS:
 ENEMIES AND HINDRANCES TO THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION
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Introduction

The scope of this brief paper is to explore some of the implications for the Church of Paul's profound affirmation found in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 regarding the ministry of reconciliation and its centrality in the life of the Church in light of Paul's concept of principalities and powers. More specifically, the paper aims to explain briefly Paul's thought on principalities and powers, highlight how the ministry of reconciliation involves also the reconciliation of principalities and powers, warn against the subtle work of the powers in hindering the Church's ministry, and reinforce the centrality of the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit as the basis for the Church's ministry.

Principalities and Powers

The concept of “principalities and powers” arises out of an ancient worldview which pictured various spiritual powers as influencing daily life. These could be manipulated by using magic, astrology and religious practices because the spiritual and the physical world were viewed as two sides of the same reality. Spiritual powers acted through their earthly counterparts, and vice versa. Thus, behind all institutions of earthly power there existed parallel spiritual powers.¹

Paul used this language of “principalities and powers”² to refer to forces that wage war against Christ and the Church. They strive to dominate, foster oppression and alienation, and distort human life. They serve sin's end by carrying out its agenda of dehumanization. If we were to summarize briefly Paul's thoughts on the powers we would have to highlight at least five elements:

- 1) Principalities and powers subsist in Christ and find their fulfillment in him. (Col 1:15-17).
- 2) There is currently a breach between Christ and the powers. (Rom. 8:38ff; 1 Cor. 2:8; Col. 1:15-20). Created to serve Christ, principalities and powers do not currently fulfill their purpose but are in a state of rebellion. They foster oppression, slavery and fear.
- 3) The cross was the decisive event in defeating the powers. There, Christ disarmed and made a public spectacle of them (Col. 2:15).
- 4) In spite of their defeat, however, the powers continue to wage war against Christ and his Church (Eph. 6:12). Their demonic action continues to afflict human life, especially outside the Church (Eph 2:2).

1 Davide Cantarella and Kenneth L. Waters Sr., “Principalities and Powers” in *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Al Truesdale (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 2013), 431.

2 For a comprehensive treatment of the New Testament language of powers see Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

- 5) At the end of the age all principalities and powers will be decisively subjected to Christ as Lord. They will no longer distort and dehumanize; Christ's victory will be thoroughly consummated (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:10).³

While in the past this Pauline concept and language of powers were often seen “as the last vestiges of an antiquated mythology,”⁴ since the second half of last century principalities and powers have been the object of increasing interest and dialogue. Many see this as a useful concept that helps us recognize that social life has both seen and unseen elements, both of which need to be taken into account as we try to grasp the dynamics that shape human life.⁵ If we were to transpose the powers into contemporary language, we would have to agree with Stringfellow that they include “all institutions, all ideologies, all images, all movements, all causes, all corporations, all bureaucracies, all traditions, all methods and routines, all conglomerates, all races, all nations, all idols”⁶ – anything that gives order and shape to our lives.

The Church and the Fallen Powers

As said above, like all people and things, the powers are fallen, and thus demonic. However, the word *demonic* does not mean evil, but rather refers to death, to fallenness. A power is demonic because it exists “in the present age in a state of alienation from God, cut off from the life originating in God's life, separated from its own true life, and, thus, being in a state of death.”⁷ In our individualistic cultures and human-centered Christianity we often forget that the Fall had greater and more cosmic consequences than just the alienation of humans from God. So, as Stringfellow says:

The Fall is not just the estate in which humans reject God and exalt themselves, as if they were like God. The term does not merely mean the pretensions of human pride. It is all of that and something more. The Fall is also the awareness of human beings of their estrangement from God, themselves, each other, and all things, and their pathetic search for God or some substitute for God within and outside themselves and each other in the principalities and in the rest of Creation. So human beings, in their fallenness, are found sometimes idolizing themselves, sometimes idolizing snakes, bugs, other creatures, or natural phenomena, or sometimes idolizing nation, ideology, race, or one of the other principalities.⁸

3 Cantarella and Waters, “Principalities and Powers”, 431.

4 See Peter O'Brien's excellent “Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: the Problem of Contextualization*, edited by D. A. Carson, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 111.

5 Ted Grimsrud, “Engaging Walter Wink” in *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System*, edited by Ray C. Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2006), 4.

6 William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), 143. For a detailed exposition of Stringfellow's views, see Bill Wylie-Kellerman, ed., *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) and Andrew W. McThenia Jr., ed., *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

7 Kellermann, *A Keeper of the Word*, 199.

8 Kellermann, *A Keeper of the Word*, 199-200.

The death and resurrection of Christ not only mark the end of the dominion of the powers (Col 2:15), but also the rise of a new creation, the *ekklesia* of God. The powers have been defeated and shamed at the cross, but they need to be reconciled, together with all creation. And the community of those who follow the Crucified One is the ordained structure through which reconciliation will occur (2 Cor 5:14-21). Here reconciliation is to be demonstrated and its consummation anticipated.

As John Howard Yoder said: “The Powers have been defeated not by some kind of cosmic hocus-pocus, but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon them is... the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church who herself is a structure and a power in society.”⁹

The vocation of the Church, according to the letter to the Ephesians, is to make known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God (3:10). The immediate context of the verse suggests that the wisdom of God is revealed in His forming one body made of seemingly irreconcilable elements--Jews and Gentiles. But the unity of Jews and Gentiles is simply the first page of God’s grand plan of universal reconciliation. Thus, the principalities and powers must know that God’s intention is to bring all things (including themselves!) under the authority of the Creator. And they must come to know this truth through this improbable new power, which itself is the evidence that God is serious about accomplishing His purpose. As Bruce wrote, “the ‘principalities and powers’ learn from the church that they too have a place in the plan of God. The reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles in this new creation is a token of the reconciliation in which they in their turn are to be embraced.”¹⁰ In this light the Church appears as “God’s blueprint” for the future reconciled cosmos, and God’s builder of a project that will be gradually unveiled as the fullness of time approaches. Things in heaven and on earth will be reconciled and united under Christ the head (Eph 1:9-10).¹¹ Or, as O’Brien asserts, “The Church is not only the pattern, but also the means God is using to show [that] his purposes are moving triumphantly to their climax.”¹²

Dehumanization and the Church

In light of what has been said so far, we may need ask to what extent the present life of the Church is free from the influence and dominion of the powers. Because of its redeemed and redemptive nature, is the Church a *free port* that does not pay any duties to the principalities and powers?

9 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 158. The words “a structure and a power in society” must be understood in the context of Yoder’s conviction that the proclamation “Christ is Lord” is a social, political, and structural *fact* which has value regardless of whether people or the powers accept it (156-157).

10 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 321. Not all scholars agree on the final reconciliation of the powers. Perceiving the powers as solely spiritual beings living in rebellion against Christ, Clinton Arnold believes that they will eventually be annihilated. See *Powers of Darkness: Principalities & Powers in Paul’s Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 102-103.

11 Bruce, 321-322.

12 Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 248.

While it is certainly the community of the redeemed, the Church too participates in the fallenness of creation and in this already-but-not-yet time eagerly awaits the final consummation of the Kingdom. This means that we can find in the life of the Church traces of the subtle work of the powers and that it is entirely plausible that, in our efforts to be faithful to the proclamation of the Gospel and “to reconcile all things to the Father”, we may have let the powers creep in and inject a dose of idolatry without even realizing it. Indeed, my suggestion is that wherever there are elements of dehumanization in the Church, these are the results of a misdirected worship, arising from the recondite action of the powers. Dehumanization and false worship point to the powers.

I have been pondering the issue of dehumanization in the Church for a number of years and it recently resurfaced when a colleague and I were discussing the work of an acquaintance of his, a Christian counselor who runs a clinic in Germany that has seen in later years a tremendous increase of church leaders needing psychological help due to the unmanageable pressures of ministry. I thought to myself, “how can we invite people to become fully human when we ourselves all too often create systems that strip our ministers of their humanity?” What are the powers that we worship and at the altar of which we sacrifice our ministers? Success? Size? Reputation?

Similar questions could be asked regarding the reasons that do not allow most church people to have a civil conversation with the LGTB community. I dare say that, unconsciously, many Christians perceive them as somewhat less than human. So, what are the powers that blind us with hubris and prevent us from being a humanizing, redemptive presence? Is it our unwavering commitment to truth? Is it morality (or moralism)?

Singles, too, have in recent years become more vocal of the sense of discomfort they feel in many churches.¹³ It's now common to refer to singles' ministry as a “meat market”. The general feeling is that singles are treated as “incomplete halves of a future couple.”¹⁴ What god has shaped our narrative of “obligatory” marriage and “anomalous” singleness? Or has the narrative itself become a god that blesses some and rejects the others? Has marriage itself become a power?

Perhaps more worrying still is the ease with which we dehumanize and write off those who have a different political stance, those who have a different theological stance, or even those with whose decisions we do not agree. Social networks have recently become the arena where much venom is spewed, often in name of justice, honesty and transparency and at times even in the name of Jesus. All this is at the hands of a community, the members of which should be known by their love.

This list of areas where the powers are at work could really go on, and on. The Church is not immune of the destructive work of the powers. And, at times, churches become fallen powers themselves – oppressive systems centered on their own existence¹⁵ that enslave and dehumanize.

The Church, Reconciliation, and the Power of the Spirit

¹³ See, for example, Christine Colon and Bonnie Field, *Singled Out: Why celibacy must be reinvented in today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), 2009.

¹⁴ Kevin Brown, “A Single Voice” in *Clergy Journal* (September 1, 2006), 36.

¹⁵ Kellerman, *A Keeper of the Word*, 262-265.

Because of the role the Church must play in reconciling all of creation to Christ, its life must be free from domination by the powers. As Yoder put it, “The Church is a herald of liberation, not a community of slaves.”¹⁶ Just as Christ did not let the powers define his identity and ministry, so the Church must stand against the subtle and clandestine attempts by the powers to divert and distort its mission and identity. The risk is real, for the powers are alive, though defeated, in human affairs.

Communities of believers must recognize and embrace Christ’s victory over evil. This is why, as Marva Dawn emphasizes, “the New Testament is so concerned that churches remain an alternative society, not fostering the parasitic growth of the powers of evil, but maintaining purity and freedom.”¹⁷ Berkhof aptly noted, “All resistance and every attack against the gods of this age will be unfruitful, unless the Church herself *is* resistance and attack, unless she demonstrates in her life and fellowship how men can live freed from the Powers.”¹⁸ No real ministry can occur if the Church permits the powers to creep in and deceive her into acting as another fallen and demonic power. We may witness large auditoriums, impressive speeches, glamorous music, media coverage and widespread approval – we may have all the elements we often associate with strength and power, but no ministry worthy of the name. The Church will not be able to carry out the ministry of reconciliation by incarnating the values of the powers.

Therefore, in order to carry out effectively the ministry of reconciliation, the Church must be alert and aware of the subtle ways of the powers. The Church was created to be more than simply a catalyst of human transformation. It was created to be an instrument of cosmic reconciliation. Only by taking the powers seriously and being aware of their subtle work can the Church be truly faithful to its call and effective in its mission.

Furthermore, the Christian community must be willing to pay the price of its witness to the powers.¹⁹ The proclamation that Christ is Lord and they are not is not free of risk, as the death of Christian martyrs continues to show. The “Way of the cross” remains the “Way of Christ.” Following the crucified One, yesterday as today, means walking together on the narrow way of weakness and redemptive suffering, in order to participate in his resurrection power. Only a servant community committed to God’s grand plan of reconciliation will receive from the Holy Spirit the strength and courage needed to face the dangers of its central proclamation. “Christ is Lord” continues to be a dangerous statement; but it is also the constitutive truth behind the world’s existence. It has the power to save, transform, and reconcile.

Thus, the Church must continue to proclaim courageously the Gospel of hope instead of retreating into a “holy seclusion” out of despair over the corruption in the world. The proclamation that the “the [world’s] only source of hope is God and not the powers”²⁰ is a liberating message God will fully confirm by reconciling all things to Himself. He will make all things new (Rev 21:5), in spite of the fact that sufficient evidence may be difficult to ascertain at the moment.

16 Yoder, *The Politics*, 148.

17 Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 30.

18 Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 50-51.

19 Dawn, *Powers*, 31.

20 Dawn, 32.

Finally, the Church must live in the power of the Holy Spirit and use His gifts to discern and rebuke the work of the powers. Berkhof writes:

By the might of the indwelling Holy Spirit the strength of the Powers is limited, also, in the life of the individual believer. Somehow he escapes the temptations and the treats. Somehow his Christian liberty bursts through their servitude. . . . From this discernment there springs forth a basically different way of dealing with creaturely reality. The Holy Spirit “shrinks” the Powers before the eye of faith. They may well have inflated themselves into omnipotent total value systems, but the believer sees them in their true proportions, as nothing more than one segment of creation, existing because of the Creator, and limited by other creatures.²¹

William Stringfellow strikes the same chord when he says that the eschatological gifts of the Spirit empower the Church’s discernment, resistance and hope, and equip believers to live humanly in the midst of the dehumanizing influence of the powers.²² Through the indwelling Spirit the Church is reminded that the power at work in its midst is greater than any other power.

Conclusion

The Church's ministry of reconciliation extends beyond the conversion of sinners; it is a cosmic mission that calls for the *ekklesia* of God to be a community that lives free from the powers, following the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Church must continually discern the subtle ways of the powers; continually ask itself if its worship is directed to the one and only God; continually seeking to be freed from dehumanization and dehumanizing tendencies; and continually asking for forgiveness for failing to so. Only then, its appeal “be reconciled to God” will be filled with the liberating, transforming, life-giving power of the Spirit.

21 Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 48-49.

22 Stringfellow, *An Ethics for Christians*, 145.