

robb davis: Advocacy Part IV: "Principalities and Powers"--What we are Up Against as Advocates

Power and the Powers

In the [previous section](#) we reviewed some advocacy principles based on Yoder's *The Christian Witness to the State*. Here we will take the first of several excursions into the concepts of "power" and "powers" and what they mean for our advocacy efforts. I introduced the concept of "powers" in the previous section and we have seen the idea of "power" in the basic definitions of advocacy in [Parts I and II](#) of this work. While there is only a one letter difference between the words *power* and *powers*, that letter makes a great deal of difference for our analysis. The basic definitions of advocacy I have laid out suggest that our advocacy efforts are directed at those in power, because we assume that they can and should do something about the injustice of concern. The concept of the "powers" focuses not merely on those who hold power but on the systems, ideologies and structures (institutions, for example) in which they work and in which we all live--and their influence on creating or maintaining justice.

Talking about *power* acknowledges that certain individuals and institutions are given (or take upon themselves) the right to make decisions that affect the lives of other people. However, stating that institutions (states, corporations, churches, universities, voluntary organizations, etc.) are *powers* acknowledges that they have an identity and force that are more than the sum of the individuals that work within them, and points to a "spiritual" reality about their ability to constrain or promote human flourishing. While the idea of *powers* is not a uniquely Christian concept (in the film *The Corporation* for example, corporations are presented as supra-human entities that transcend the full control of the individuals who work within them and who have an identity of their own), in this section we will examine it in light of the biblical concepts of "principalities and powers" (among other terms).

Gary Haugin of the International Justice Mission speaks about power and its relation to justice in this way:

(W)hat does it mean to say that ours is a God of justice? Is there anything that we can usefully understand about justice in the Bible? I believe there is. Fundamentally justice has to do with the exercise of power. To say God is a God of justice is to say that he is a God who cares about the right exercise of power or authority. (Haugin, 1999: p 71)

Theologian Hendrik Berkhof (whom we will analyze in more detail below) says this about Paul's conception of the powers:

They are the linkage between God's love and visible human experience. They are to hold life together, preserving it within God's love... as bonds between God and man. As signposts toward the service of God, they form the **framework** within which such service must needs be carried out. (Berkhof 1962, 1977: p 29 emphasis added)

Elsewhere he refers to them as the "framework of creation, the canvas which invisibly supports the tableau of the life of men and society." (Berkhof 1962, 1977: p 23) We will explore in more detail below more precisely what the powers *are* but here I merely want to use these quotes to distinguish the concepts of power and powers. One might say that human power is exercised within the powers (the "frameworks") and thus as we address the humans in positions of power we must recognize that they are part of structures that have meaning and purpose that transcend them. Clearly the concepts of power and the powers are related but I wish to argue here that they are distinct and the concept of the powers helps us think more clearly about the reality of the institutions that make up our world and have a clear influence on human flourishing.

The Concept of the "Powers"

Here I would more formally like to introduce the concept of the powers drawing on the work of several theologians whose exegesis of Paul's writing (especially) has been critical to making the apostle's understanding of the concept relevant to our thinking today. The scriptures most relevant to this analysis are the following (per Berkhof) with emphasis placed on key terms:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor **principalities**, nor things present, nor things to come, nor **powers**, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38, 39)

(W)e do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the **rulers of this age** has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (I Corinthians 2:6-8)

(Speaking of the resurrection) Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all **rule** and all **authority** and **power**. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. (I Corinthians 15:24-26)

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all **rule** and **authority** and **power** and **dominion**, and every **name** that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:18-21)

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the **course of this world**, according to the **prince of the power of the air**, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 2:1,2)

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the **rulers** and the **authorities** in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:8-10)

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the **rulers**, against the **powers**, against the **world forces** of this darkness, against the **spiritual forces** of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether **thrones** or **dominions** or **rulers** or **authorities**--all things have been created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1:13-16)

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the **rulers** and **authorities**, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Colossians 2:13-15)

In summary, the highlighted terms in these passages (according this translation) are: principalities, powers, rulers of this age, rule, authority, dominion, course of

this world, prince of the power of the air, authorities, world forces, spiritual forces and thrones. It is not my purpose here to explore the Greek words from which these have been translated nor to explore their meaning. While Walter Wink has provided helpful details on the historical meaning of these terms in three books (see Wink, 1984, 1986 and 1992), Yoder suggests (in reference to Berkhof's 1962 work)...

(P)robably for Paul each of these several terms had its own very precise and technical meaning; that they are not simply synonyms standing parallel. Still, the best we can do today is to come to some sort of understanding about the general trend of meaning which the total body of thought has for us. (Yoder 1994: Footnote 2, p 137)

We will follow Yoder's counsel on this point and seek a broad explanation of the meaning of the broader concept of the powers (which I am using as a summary term to connect all the terms here) while examining the relevance of these ideas to our advocacy efforts.

Marva Dawn begins her very helpful review of recent scholarship on the concept of the powers (Dawn 2001) by noting that the notion of principalities and powers is common in religious and broader societal discourse and is used to point to the "immensity" of the influence of forces that transcend the merely human. She goes on to develop the idea that in among Christian theologians in recent times there are two broad ways of interpreting the meaning of these concepts: the **demythologizers** who "too easily identify the powers only with human structures, and the **personalizers**, who insist that the powers should be identified with angelic beings." (Dawn 2001; p 11) Dawn goes on to quote a variety of authors who argue that to the writers of the biblical texts in question the distinction was probably meaningless and that, in some sense, both ideas were intended.

Whatever the case, Dawn and many others argue convincingly that, whatever else they might refer to, these concepts do include the idea of "structures" that provide (as already suggested by Berkhof) a framework for the good functioning of society

and that they include the state and other institutions. Yoder summarizes his understanding in this way:

(W)e might say that we have here an inclusive vision of religious structures... intellectual structures (-ologies and -isms), moral structures (codes and customs), political structures (the tyrant, the market, the school, the courts, race, and nation. (Yoder 1994; p 143)

The Nature of the Powers

From this point on I am going to limit the discussion to the powers as "structures" including the state and, though Yoder did not mention them directly, institutions such as corporations and multilateral agencies such as the various UN bodies. This is not to deny the importance of viewing the concept of powers as referring at least in part to created beings. Rather it is because narrowing the focus to institutions and other structures is more closely related to advocacy work. This implies that I do not accept the idea that "demonic beings" merely use human structures (institutions) as instruments in their work. I disagree with an instrumentalist view because I don't see evidence for it in scripture--aside from certain apocalyptic references made concerning angels of certain locations. However even these usages do not imply that "angels" or "demons" merely dispose of nations or states as instruments to fulfill their designs.

With these points in mind let us return to Paul's writing on the subject--which is the most complete in the scriptures and not at odds with other references to similar points made by other writers. We see three broad themes emerging in the texts quoted above: 1) in a positive sense, Christ has created the powers for his purposes; 2) the powers have gone astray and do not serve Christ's purposes in this age; 3) Christ, at the cross, triumphed over the powers and a time is coming when they will again (being dethroned) serve the purposes for which they were created. As Walter Wink summarized this: the powers are good, the powers are fallen, the powers will be redeemed. (Wink 1992; p 65).

Let us examine these three points in more detail because they are critical not only for an understanding of the institutions--the structures--that we face in our advocacy work, but because they also provide us with important insights into how we might think about our approach to these institutions given the creative and redeeming work of Christ.

Created for Good

After describing the Rabbinic and Greek cosmologies surrounding Paul at the time of his writing, Hendrik Berkhof draws some initial conclusions about Paul's use of the terms:

Paul observes that life is ruled by a series of Powers. He speaks of time (present and future) , of space (depth and height), of life and death, of politics and philosophy, of public opinion and Jewish law, of pious tradition and the fateful course of the stars. Apart from Christ man is at the mercy of these Powers. They encompass, carry, and guide his life. The demands of the present, fear of the future, state and society, life and death, tradition and morality--they are all our "guardians and trustees," the forces which hold together the world and the life of men and preserve them from chaos. (Berkhof 1962; p 22)

Later, in a passage already alluded to above he adds:

(T)he Powers serve as the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinnings of creation. By no means does Paul think of the Powers as evil in themselves. (Berkhof 1962; pp 28-29)

In drawing these conclusions he is referring not only to the Colossians 1 passage but also to Galatians where Paul talks about tradition and the law as "tutors" and

Romans where he talks about them in the context of other "world forces". John Howard Yoder says that the "all things" in the Colossians 1 passage means that the world powers are given by and held together in Christ. Further, in discussing Paul's writing in Romans 13, he argues that even the fallen power of the state has a continued role in God's plan because "even tyranny... is still better than chaos and we should be subject to it" (Yoder 1994; p 141) Wink states that "(t)he Powers are inextricably locked into God's system, whose human face is revealed in Christ." (Wink 1992; p 67)

We should pause here to consider the import of these ideas. While none of these authors suggest that *every* human institution is good (think of the mafia for instance), there is a strong sense that God has given institutions (and traditions, for example) to humans to provide them with order, with frameworks, with structure in the absence of which life would be unpredictable, chaotic and profoundly dehumanizing. As we engage in advocacy to institutions in ways already suggested in the previous section--to bring a "corrective" message to them--we can do so with confidence because we understand that God desires them to play a role that enables humans to live and to flourish; to be what God intended them to be. (This may be why Yoder writes in relation to the state at least that ...the Christian church knows why the state exists--knows, in fact, better than the state itself... (Yoder 1964/2002; p16)) Berkhof suggests this very role and with it we transition to the current reality about the powers--their fallenness. He writes:

Therefore the believer's combat is never to strive *against* the Orders, but rather to battle for God's intention for them, and against their corruption. (Berkhof 1962; 29 emphasis in original)

Fallen

Despite the affirmations in Colossians 1 and elsewhere about the "goodness" of the powers, other passages reveal a current reality that is far less positive. It is this reality--the fallenness of the powers--that represents one of the great faith challenges of our time. For if, indeed, Christ has triumphed over the powers, how

then can they continue to cause such suffering in the world? Why is it that they fail to achieve God's plan for them in the present? The answer to these questions is beyond the purview of this volume but the broader question of the meaning of fallenness for our advocacy is important. And, perhaps as we analyze this reality and the redemption of the powers below we will also gain some insights to enable us to answer these difficult questions.

So what, in practical terms, does it mean for the powers to be "fallen"? In simplest terms it means that the powers--the institutions and structures created to provide order--fail to fulfill their responsibilities in these areas. However, and worse, not only do they fail to be what they were meant to be but they take on other roles that enable them to do great harm. In other words, their fallenness is not merely a "neutral" phenomenon.

While I have purposefully avoided a full analysis of all the concepts and terms related to the powers, it is useful here to discuss one particular term--*stoicheia*--which a number of authors discuss. This term, translated as "elemental things" or "elemental principles" in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2, refers to one form of the powers--their reality as human laws and traditions. Though slightly different from other concepts of "thrones" or "principalities" that we have seen, most writers view them as part of the seamless "ordering" powers of the world, created by God for good--but fallen. Indeed, it is in these passages that we see how rather than enabling order and flourishing they enslave humans. What Paul says of them and how their purpose has been perverted is thus instructive as we consider what has happened to all the powers of the world. Willard Swartley says this of these "principles":

Structures that are deemed good and that provide the basis for natural or social order that enables life (for the Jews, the law) are turned into ultimate values, ends in themselves, and thus elevated to powers over one's life and then worshiped as gods. (Swartley in Gingerich and Grimsrud 2006; p 103)

Berkhof extends this idea to the powers more generally

The Powers are no longer instruments, linkages between God's love, as revealed in Christ, and the visible world of creation. In fact, they have become gods (Galatians 4:8), behaving as though they were the ultimate ground of being, and demanding from men an appropriate worship... No longer do the Powers bind man and God together; they separate them. They stand as a roadblock between the Creator and His creation.

The Powers still continue to fulfill one half of their function. They still undergird human life and society and preserve them from chaos. But by holding the world together, they hold it away from God, not close to Him. They are "the rulers of this age" (I Corinthians 2:6). In their desire to rule they are in enmity towards the Lord of glory, who can suffer them only as instruments, not as lords. (Berkhof 1962; p 30)

The reference to the I Corinthians 2 passage in the foregoing is critical because it points specifically to the role of the state and leaders. Paul's message is that the powers have lost track in a very fundamental way of their role in the world. And the results are not neutral. In losing their way they even went so far as to crucify the Lord of glory. Yoder goes further in describing the implications of their fallenness. After recognizing that we cannot live without the powers due to their ordering function in the world he says this:

(T)he structures fail to serve us as they should. They do not enable humanity to live a genuinely free, loving life. They have absolutized themselves and they demand from the individual and society unconditional loyalty. They harm and enslave us. *We cannot live with them.* (Yoder 1994; p 143 emphasis in original)

We are left here with an image of powers that are bent on their own survival--as ends in themselves--and engaged in practices that create allegiance towards themselves so as to assure that survival. In focusing on their own survival they end up enslaving and dehumanizing the creation they were intended to protect and

nurture. Again, let us reflect on this reality for a moment as we consider our advocacy work. Understanding the reality of the fallenness of the power should not lead us to fear (as we shall see below) but it should act as a sobering reminder of the extent to which they will go to assure their existence as an end in itself. The individuals with whom we deal in our advocacy efforts work and operate within systems that they do not fully control--that have imperatives that are at odds with God's intended purpose for them.

Some may object that in saying the foregoing I have turned non-personal institutions into "persons" and have given them moral responsibility that they do not have. I will acknowledge here that it is not fully clear to me (nor to many of the authors I am citing here) exactly the sense in which these institutions bear responsibility or have a "will of their own". It is true that we deal with flesh and blood humans in our challenge to injustice. However, as Paul said in Ephesians 6, our true struggle is **not** against that flesh and blood. Jacques Ellul is less ambiguous in suggesting that powers such as Mammon and "technique" (roughly the totality of means having absolute efficiency in every domain of human life) have "designs" of their own. In relation to Mammon he says this about what Jesus was describing in Matthew 6 and Luke 16:

Here Jesus personifies money and considers it a sort of god... What Jesus is revealing is that money is a power. This term should be understood not in its vague meaning, "force," but in the specific sense in which it is used in the New Testament. Power is something that acts by itself, is capable of moving other things, is autonomous (or claims to be), is a law unto itself, and presents itself as an active agent... Jesus is not describing a relationship between us and an object, but between us and an *active agent*. He is not suggesting that we use money wisely or earn it honestly. He is speaking of a power which tries to be like God, which makes itself our master and *which has specific goals*. (Ellul 1984; pp 75-76 emphasis added)

While space does not permit even a cursory view of Ellul's voluminous treatment of the issue of "technique" it is important to note how he talks about it. Writing in a Christian context he notes that technique has gained a deified religious character that we must destroy (see Ellul and Vanderburg 1981; p 108). In saying this he

acknowledges that technique is a power--something that his secular writing, ironically, makes even clearer. Indeed, as he writes about technique one has the distinct impression that he is talking about something with a will--an imperative--of its own. For example he says this about technique and morality:

(A) principle characteristic of technique... is its refusal to tolerate moral judgments. It is absolutely independent of them and eliminates them from its domain. Technique never observes the distinction between moral and immoral use. It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent technical morality. (Ellul 1967; p 97)

Notice throughout the "personification" of technique as an active agent. Did Ellul intend this? A broad reading of his work on technique would suggest that he did and that he viewed technique as evolving in such a way that it maintains an independent power over human endeavors--guiding action and bending it to its will. I am not asking you to accept uncritically Ellul's views on the "agency" of these powers. However, in the broadest reading of Paul's use of these concepts and keeping in mind their fuller meaning as discussed above, I would suggest that we must acknowledge that there are structures in our world that act and mold human behavior in ways that demonstrate their autonomy from individual human decisions. Indeed, this might be one way to think about what it means for them to be "spiritual" powers.

To reiterate, the foregoing suggests that, as advocates we must acknowledge the fallenness of the structures we address concerning injustice. Further, we must approach the individuals in them with the understanding that they are part of structures that, while created for good, are capable, in their fallenness, of truly monstrous and dehumanizing acts. Indeed, we may assume that the injustice--the improper use of power--is directly related to their fallenness and its attendant behaviors, including the desire to be worshiped. This should not lead us to fear for, as we shall see shortly, Christ is victor, having triumphed over the powers. However this understanding should remind us our need to engage in advocacy prayerfully; seeking God's wisdom and patience. William Stringfellow provided a warning about the danger of not acknowledging the powers in the 1970s. Writing on the US state as a power he said:

The principalities and powers have received little attention in American Christendom. In that context the customary propositions of moral theology concern individual decision and action and the supposed efficacy of the conviction of the individual for social renewal and societal change... As a social ethic, this concentration upon the efficacious potential of individuals...suffers the distortion of any partial truth. That is, what it overlooks or omits is more significant than that which it asserts and affirms. What is most crucial about the situation, biblically speaking, is the failure of moral theology, in the American context, to confront the principalities--the institutions, systems, ideologies, and other political and social powers--as militant, aggressive, and immensely influential creatures in this world as it is... Americans--including professed Christians, who have biblical grounds to be wiser--remain, it seems, astonishingly obtuse about these powers... Yet to be ignorant or gullible or ingenuous about the demons, to underestimate the inherent capacities of the principalities, to fail to notice the autonomy of these powers as creatures abets their usurpation of human life and their domination of human beings. (Stringfellow 1973; pp 17-18)

Simply put, let us not be naive about the capacity of the powers for evil. Yes, the powers are fallen but, thankfully, that is not the end of the story. For us the good news is that Christ is victor, and while our advocacy work must be done with an eye to the fallenness of the powers and their capacity to perpetrate great injustice--enslaving not only humans in general but also the humans who work within their structures--we can approach it with great hope that our "witness" will bear fruit. This is so because Christ has triumphed over the powers and God will restore them to what God intended them to be. We turn to this final issue now.

To be Redeemed

As the passages at the beginning of this section indicate, Christ "disarmed" the powers and in time will have "demolished the rule" of all of them. After a careful analysis of the I Corinthians 15 passage and Colossians 1 Berkhof concludes it is not God's intent to destroy the powers but to return them to their originally

intended functions--in reconciling them, along with all else--to God. Karl Barth, in analyzing issues of church and state concludes the same thing:

The destiny of the rebellious angelic powers which is made clear in Christ's resurrection and parousia (appearing) is not that they will be annihilated, but that they will be forced into the service and the glorification of Christ, and through him, God. (Barth 1991; p 27)

Redemption means that they will be "liberated" to be that which they were intended to be. This is good news. The above-listed passages, however, go a bit further with Ephesians 3 making it clear that the existence of the church itself is to be used by God to reveal to the powers the full mystery of their role within God's plan. Jacques Ellul has already suggested one way in which this happens in relation to technique: by refusing to deify the powers--indeed by destroying the myth of their god-like status. For Yoder, as we have seen, the most important thing the church can "do" in relation to the truth of Christ's victory is to "be" what God intends it to be. As we saw in the previous section, this does not mean that the church presents an ideal social plan to the state (or other institutions) but rather that it lives faithfully as itself--as a reconciling, loving, servant community--calling the state to be what it is intended to be.

Marva Dawn without going into the details of exactly how it will work in practice says the following concerning the present work of the church vis-a-vis the powers:

(T)he sovereignty of the principalities and powers has been broken, and it is the task of the Church to proclaim that. The working of the powers is limited, and it is the task of the Church to display that. Finally, this broken sovereignty and limitation are signs of the ultimate defeat of the powers, and the Church is the place where those signs are celebrated. (Dawn 2001; p27)

Dawn goes on to write about the imperative of "weakness"--of recognizing the end of our power in the face of these realities so that God's power might be made

manifest in the world. This would seem to provide an important directive for the attitude we should maintain as we engage in advocacy.

That the powers are still acting in rebellion should not discourage us. We live in an "in-between" time in which the consummation of Christ's reign is not yet complete but it is the church's task to embody the reality of this reign and, in so doing, to remind the powers in deed and word the limits of their role and their responsibilities to fulfill that role. The church, in its being, reveals the mystery of what God is about in the world. So, rather than ask why evil continues, it would seem more appropriate for the church to get on following its Lord in being and becoming what that Lord asks it to be. This includes living out its identity as "alien ambassadors" (a theme we explored in the previous section).

I would argue that this embodying includes speaking to the state about its role and providing a corrective to its excesses. In this sense, our advocacy is built upon the knowledge that God is using the church to reveal God's will of reconciliation to the world--including the powers. Advocacy can, therefore, take on many forms but is essentially a witness to what God is about in the world. We will examine later the *ways* in which we can speak to the state using a language it will readily understand. In other words, we will see that it is not necessary to use the language of "powers", "reconciliation of all things" or "reign of Christ" in order to be faithful advocates, faithful witnesses.

To sum up: we see that God has created the structures and systems of our world for good. They have a role to play and we can approach them with the confidence that God desires to use them to achieve God's plan. However, we cannot be naive about what the powers, in their fallenness are capable of. We cannot neglect that fact that their bent is not to accomplish the purpose God has given them but that they seek both autonomy from God and to build allegiance to themselves. It is probably not too much to suggest that the very injustices about which we confront the powers is a direct result of these realities. However, we can also be confident in approaching them because we understand that Christ has both triumphed over the powers and that God will redeem them and cause them to fulfill the role for which God created them. Thus, the church can live in freedom and with the clear conviction that its speaking is a role that God has assigned it to participate God's

great reconciling plan. This full understanding of the powers should help to make us wise as serpents but as humble as doves.

In a later section I will bring various points from this section together with Yoder's counsels in the previous one to lay out some specific suggestions for how to engage in advocacy Christianly. Before that, however, we have further excursions to take to examine how various traditions have engaged the state. We do this recognizing that the state is a significant power in our day and one of only a limited number of modern institution that receive special attention--as powers--in scripture. Given that much advocacy is directed at the state, it is useful to understand, briefly, how various traditions have evolved a theology and "praxis" related to the state. We turn to that next.