

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 6

Volume 6 • Number 1 • April 1982

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews selected from publications
worldwide for an international readership,
interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary
living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

CONCLUSION

We are faced with an ambiguity. At one extreme, as advocated by the majority of Asian theologians, contemporary Asia is the sole consideration towards the construction of a “critical framework” within which we are to pursue our theological reflection. But such a simplistic incorporation is laden with dangers; modernisation is a treacherous, even if necessary, path teeming with dark forces lying in ambush. There are ample evidences that refer to the evil by-products of modernization. An independent voice of the Bible must be allowed to assume an authoritative posture over developing Asia. Such a consideration, however, is not to support the opposite extreme maintained by those content to merely parrot the biblical content. We cannot escape, epistemologically, our cultures, backgrounds, and concerns, which define our mode of expression. But more than this, our theology, while thoroughly grounded in the Bible, must address the concrete problems of Asia today. A penetrating study of Asia’s problem is hence imperative.

An Asian theology must therefore be governed by the dialectic interplay between culture and the Bible. The cultural context poses the questions to the Bible. And the biblical answer, to complete the hermeneutical circle, must be given full integrity not only to respond to the contemporary issues but especially to reformulate, if necessary, the questions themselves. And these answers must then be applied to the bleeding sores of a suffering continent, or some such thing; we need to complete the *Pastoral* circle too! p. 50

Principalities and Powers and their Relationship to Structures

Peter O’Brien

*Reprinted from The Reformed Theological Review, Jan.–April 1981
with permission*

The author surveys the arguments for interpreting “principalities and powers” in terms of socio-political structures of human society, and then examines the biblical texts especially in Ephesians and Colossians, and suggests a theological reconstruction. This article should be read in conjunction with “The Asian Way of Thinking in Theology”. The reader may then reflect on the importance of cultural background in biblical interpretation.

(Editor)

INTRODUCTION

the political as *well* as the cultural sphere. The Colossian problem was basically cultural, and thus Christ’s cosmic victory finds its application in cultural terms. But it can be applied politically. *Ezouslaus* is known to be used of political authorities ([Rom. 13:1](#)), and in [1 Cor. 2:7–8](#), the “powers and principalities” are held responsible for the crucifixion. Such a blending of history and “mythology” which is otherwise inconceivable to the modern West, can be quite naturally affirmed by a Filipino hermeneutic. Demonic beings also stand behind political structures.

In a recent article written in preparation for the meeting of the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelization, held at Melbourne, Australia in May, 1980, Ronald J. Sider commented: "To announce Christ's Lordship to the principalities and powers is to tell governments that they are not sovereign."¹ Earlier in the same article Sider had noted: "There is growing agreement that when St. Paul speaks of the principalities and powers ..., he refers *both* to the socio-political structures of human society and to unseen spiritual forces that undergird, lie behind and in some mysterious way help shape human socio-political structures."² Sider's references to governments, and the principalities being identified, in part at least, with "the socio-political structures of human society" is consistent with a recent trend among contemporary theologians. So, for example, Ernst Käsemann, in a paper read at the Melbourne conference and entitled "The Eschatological Royal Reign of God," acknowledged that when the New Testament referred to the powers and authorities it seemed to indicate that they were personal. However, Käsemann recognizes that we may "criticize and demythologize the language and ideas of an antique world-view as out of date." In fact, he adds, we must do this "since only in this way can we have a true perception of the reality of our contemporary life and present world" (p.4). Accordingly we must reinterpret the Pauline statements and **P. 51** understand them of demonic structures which need to be exorcized in the name of Christ.

The purpose of this essay is three-fold: first, to chart the development of this post-war theory which assumes that when the apostle Paul spoke of the "principalities and powers," as well as equivalent terms, he was alluding to structures of thought such as tradition, convention, law, authority and even religion, particularly as embodied in the state and its institutions, rather than to demonic intelligences. Second, we shall attempt to offer a critique of this view by reference to the New Testament. And, third, some brief concluding remarks will be made about the relationship of the principalities to the structures.

THE RECENT DEBATE³

The particular facet of Sider's work to which attention has been drawn gives evidence of an indebtedness to John Howard Yoder's writings (note especially his volume *The Politics of Jesus*) and he in turn has been influenced by Hendrick Berkhof (see below). Ernst Käsemann, meanwhile, is the most recent in a long line of exegetes to espouse this increasingly fashionable theory, and it is interesting to note in passing how similar conclusions are reached by scholars from a variety of theological backgrounds using different hermeneutical methods.

Although a number of German theologians had been debating this possibility in the 1930s, in the English-speaking world it seems to have been a post-war discussion. Gordon Rupp (*Principalities and Powers*, 1952) writing in the aftermath of the Second World War drew attention to the Pauline expression "principalities and powers" at the beginning of his book. By this phrase, borrowed from later Jewish apocalyptic thought, Paul meant "supernatural cosmic forces, a vast hierarchy of angelic and demonic beings who inhabited the stars and ... were the arbiters of human destiny," enslaving men "beneath a cosmic totalitarianism" (pp.11, 12). However, without any exegetical justification he

¹ Ronald J. Sider, "Christ and Power", *IRM* 69, (1980), p.17.

² *ibid.*, p. 12.

³ Attention is drawn to the clear and incisive treatment of this development, to which I am indebted, by John R. W. Stott in *God's new society, The message of Ephesians*, 1979, pp.267-275.

simply transferred the expression to economic, social and political forces. Rupp spoke of the “little people” who in every era had felt themselves to be nothing more than the playthings of great historical forces and now in the twentieth century [p. 52](#) believed they were the victims of “great economic and sociological pressures”. Down the centuries, according to Dr. Rupp, the principalities and powers have assumed many disguises. Today, as terrifying and as deadly as ever, they are the economic, social and political forces.

Hendrik Berkhof’s monograph, *Christ and the Powers* (1953; E.T. 1962), has been influential in this debate (for example, note Yoder’s indebtedness, *The politics of Jesus*, 135–62). His thesis is that Paul borrowed the vocabulary of the powers from Jewish apocalyptic, yet his understanding of them was different. Jewish apocalypses thought primarily of the principalities and powers as heavenly angels; Paul regarded them as structures of earthly existence (p.23). He demythologized them! Although the Apostle may have “conceived of the Powers as personal beings ... this aspect is so secondary that it makes little difference whether he did or not” (p.24). According to Berkhof such powers are to be identified with the *stoicheia tou kosmou* (“elemental spirits of the universe”) of [Galatians 4:3, 9](#) and [Colossians 2:8, 20](#). He translates the expression as “world powers” and considers they are seen in human traditions as well as religious and ethical rules. The powers (e.g. tradition, morality, justice and order) which were created by God have become tyrannical and the objects of worship. They both preserve and corrupt society. But Christ has overcome them for, in his cross and resurrection they have been “unmasked as false gods”, and “the power of illusion” has been struck from their hands.⁴ As a result Christians see through the deception of the powers and refuse, in principle at least, to be enslaved or intimidated by them. The “Holy Spirit ‘shrinks’ the powers before the eye of faith”⁵ so that the believer sees their true creaturely existence. Also the church announces to the powers that their unbroken dominion has come to an end and wages a defensive warfare against them; it is thus along these lines that Berkhof sought to explain [Ephesians 3:10](#) and [6:10–17](#).

G. B. Caird in a series of lectures delivered in 1954 (subsequently published as *Principalities and Powers. A Study of Pauline Theology*, 1956) took a similar line on the meaning of the powers in Pauline thought. He drew particular attention to three of them: first, “pagan religion and pagan power”, including the state, and according to his understanding of [Ephesians 3:10](#) these have already begun to be redeemed through Christian social action. Second, the law which is [p. 53](#) good in itself, since it is God’s, becomes demonic when it is “exalted into an independent system of religion”. The third power is those recalcitrant elements in nature which resist God’s rule, e.g. wild animals, diseases, storms and even the whole of creation’s bondage to corruption. According to Paul’s view—which Caird thinks is marred by “faulty logic and equally faulty exegesis,” not to mention “the insufficiency of Paul’s spurious arguments”⁶—man lives under these divinely appointed authorities which because of sin have become demonic agencies. These powers can be robbed of their tyrannical influence and brought into true subjection to God only in the cross.

In his more recent commentary on Ephesians Caird seems to have shifted his ground somewhat by conceding that Paul was referring to “spiritual beings” which operated in

⁴ Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, pp.388, cited by Stott, *God’s new society*, p.269.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.269.

⁶ Caird, *Principalities and Powers*, pp.20, 21, cited by Stott, *God’s new society*, p.269.

and through the structures. He comments: "The real enemies are the spiritual forces that stand behind all institutions of government, and control the lives of men and nations."⁷

Markus Barth is the fourth advocate of this position whose writings John Stott examines in his survey.⁸ In an earlier work on the subject, *The Broken Wall. A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (published in 1959), Barth identified the principalities and authorities by reference to four features of Pauline thought, namely, the state (including political, judicial and ecclesiastical authorities), death, the moral and ritual law, and economic structures including slavery. In his later comprehensive commentary on Ephesians Barth seems to agree that Paul believed in supernatural powers—a belief which Barth regards as "superstitious" or "mythological." So "Paul denotes the angelic or demonic beings that reside in the heavens" though there are direct links between these powers and structures or institutions of life on earth. In a statement that wishes to have it both ways Barth adds: "the 'principalities and powers' are at the same time intangible spiritual entities and concrete historical, social or psychic structures or institutions."⁹

One might add the names of other authors to the list, but this is unnecessary. The case has been argued with considerable skill by exegetes and theologians who have then been followed by more popular writers. Furthermore, two exegetical and hermeneutical problems of the New Testament and contemporary theology seem to have been p. 54 resolved in one stroke. On the one hand, since the onset of critical New Testament studies it has virtually been taken for granted that when Paul spoke about angels, demons or powers he was simply reflecting an antique and outmoded world-view which had to be reinterpreted radically or even dropped. On this recent view, however, Paul's obscure references to the heavenly powers speak relevantly to our own earthly situations. On the other hand, advocates of this line have admitted they had great difficulty in finding in the New Testament any allusions to social structures, which have become a significant modern preoccupation. The new theory now solves both problems simultaneously. "We lose the demons and gain the structures, for the principalities and powers are structures in disguise."¹⁰

SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS

Although one may express some doubt about this interpretation on the grounds of the presuppositions of its advocates and those who have been prepared to accept it, it would be wrong to reject the theory (or its variants) on this basis alone, or for that matter because some of its features were new. The issues must finally be settled on exegetical and theological grounds. Our initial response, therefore, will be to examine some key texts in Ephesians and Colossians which have been used in support of the theory, before making a survey of the wider New Testament teaching.

(a) Texts in Ephesians and Colossians

⁷ G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 1976, p.91.

⁸ Stott, *ibid.*, pp.270f.

⁹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 11, p.800, quoted by Stott, *op. cit.*, p.271.

¹⁰ Stott, *ibid.*, p.271.

The three main references in Ephesians to the principalities and powers are chapters [1:20–21](#); [3:10](#) and [6:10ff](#).¹¹ In the first Christ is said to have been raised by God “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion ...” The difficulty with interpreting this to mean “far above all earthly rulers and institutions” is that the realm in which Christ has been supremely exalted is specifically designated as “in the heavenlies”¹² at God’s right hand. Earthly structures do not fit this context. At chapter [3:10](#), again because of the allusion to “the heavenly places,” the interpretation which considers Paul to be asserting that God’s manifold wisdom is made known through the [p. 55](#) church to the power structures on earth is very strange indeed. Finally, in chapter [6:10ff](#) the Christian’s spiritual warfare is said to be “not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers ...” On the more recent view this must mean that the believer does not war against human forces, but demonic structures. However, there are several serious weaknesses with this understanding; first, as in the two previous references, there is the awkward addition of the phrase “in the heavenly places.” These principalities and powers are in the heavenly realm. Second, the references to “the world rulers of this present darkness” and “the spiritual hosts of wickedness,” as well as the kind of armour needed to withstand them, fit supernatural powers more easily, particularly when it is noted that the devil is mentioned twice (vs. [11](#), [16](#)) in this context. The view that the phrase means “not with human but with demonic forces,” which until recent times has been universally held, is still more satisfactory on exegetical grounds. Stott,¹³ after his exegetical critique, claims, “I have not come across a new theorist who takes into adequate account the fact that all three references to the principalities and powers in Ephesians also contain a reference in the heavenly places, that is, the unseen world of spiritual reality.” Perhaps this is also why both Caird and Barth, when writing their commentaries on the Letter to the Ephesians, modified their earlier positions in the direction of supernatural spiritual forces.

The evidence of Colossians is best understood along similar lines. At chapter [1:16](#) the principalities and powers, together with thrones and dominions as part of “all things,” have been created in Christ, as well as through him and for him. These same authorities are said to have been reconciled in him (v.[20](#)) so that the universe is again placed under its head and cosmic peace has been restored. When Paul speaks of reconciliation on this wide front he probably includes the notion of pacification, since some of the principalities and powers are not depicted as gladly surrendering to God’s grace but as submitting against their wills to a power they cannot oppose.¹⁴ Although the point cannot be established decisively from verses [16](#) and [20](#), the most natural interpretation is that four classes (“thrones, dominions, principalities and powers”) of spiritual and supernatural forces (possibly representing the highest orders of the angelic realm) are in view.¹⁵ In our judgment this personal interpretation also makes the [p. 56](#) most sense out of chapter [2:15](#). In a statement full of picturesque language and graphic metaphors Paul asserts that God stripped the principalities and powers—who kept men and women in their dreadful clutches because they possessed the damning indictment, man’s signed

¹¹ The issue of the Pauline or post-Pauline authorship is not particularly relevant to the exegetical issues and need not be examined.

¹² Note A. T. Lincoln, “A Re-examination of ‘the Heavenlies’ in Ephesians”. *NTS* 19 (1972–73), pp.468–483, esp. p.472.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.273.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this crux see my article in *RTR* 33 (1974), pp.45–53.

¹⁵ For details see Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 1971, p.51.

acknowledgement of his indebtedness—of their authority and dignity. Not only so, but having divested these principalities on the cross God exposed to the universe their utter helplessness. He has paraded these powerless “powers and principalities” in his triumphal procession in Christ, making plain to all the magnitude of his victory. Their period of rule is finished; they must worship and serve the victor. They have been pacified ([1:20](#)); overcome and reconciled, yet not finally destroyed or appeased. They continue to exist, opposed to man and his interests ([Rom. 8:38, 39](#)). But they cannot finally harm the person who is in Christ, and their ultimate overthrow though future is sure and certain ([1 Cor. 15:24–28](#)). Such language describes supernatural cosmic forces, a vast hierarchy of angelic and demonic beings, as Käsemann acknowledges when he admits that the language and ideas need to be demythologized.

Before leaving Colossians a comment should be made regarding the expression “the elements of the world” (*stoicheia tou kosmou*, [Col. 2:8, 20](#); [Gal. 4:3](#); cf. [v.9](#)). The precise meaning of this phrase has puzzled Christian interpreters since very early times as Bandstra has shown in his stimulating study on the history of the exegesis of these passages.¹⁶ One line of interpretation has been to regard *kosmos* as denoting the material, physical world, with *stoicheia* pointing to the elemental parts of that world. Eduard Schweizer,¹⁷ a recent commentator on Colossians, has pursued this line of the physical elements. He suggested that the Colossian “philosophy,” which Paul was seeking to correct in his letter, had been influenced by Pythagorean ideas in which cosmic speculation about the elements had been ethicized. The elements exercised power in much the same way as the law did. Purification of the soul took place by abstaining from meat, etc. To behave in accordance with these elements was a matter of life and death, but in fact led to a kind of slavery to innumerable legalistic demands. Whether Schweizer’s detailed arguments with reference to a Pythagorean background convince contemporary New Testament scholars or not, he has certainly opted for an impersonal understanding of *stoicheia*, meaning “elements” or “elemental principles,” and such a view lends itself more easily to [p. 57](#) being reinterpreted with reference to a structural understanding of the principalities and powers. However, the majority of commentators this century have understood the *stoicheia tou kosmou* in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements. It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these *stoicheia* were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man’s access to God’s presence.¹⁸ (Jewish apocalyptic literature had already associated angels closely with the heavenly powers. According to Jubilees 2:2 each of the elements had its own angel to rule over it, while in Enoch 60:11, 12 reference is made to the spirits of the various natural elements. In the New Testament at [Acts 7:53](#); [Gal. 3:19](#); and [Heb. 2:2](#) the Jewish tradition regarding the angelic mediation of the law is mentioned, and in [Galatians 4:3](#) some close connection between, or identification of, the angels and the *stoicheia* is required.)

(b) A Survey of the Wider New Testament Teaching

¹⁶ Andrew J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World*, 1964.

¹⁷ *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, 1976, pp.101f.

¹⁸ For a survey of the ways this expression has been understood by Christian interpreters see my forthcoming commentary, *Colossians and Philemon*.

Up to this point our critical comments have been made only with reference to the evidence of Ephesians and Colossians. It is now necessary to survey the wider New Testament teaching, though in the nature of the case our remarks will necessarily be brief.

The powers of evil are referred to by an unexpected variety of names in the New Testament, and they appear in the Synoptic Gospels, John, many of the epistles and the Book of the Revelation. In addition to “principalities” and “powers” we read of “authorities,” “dominions,” “thrones,” “names,” “princes,” “lords,” “angels,” “devils,” and “unclean or wicked spirits.” In the singular there is also mention of “Satan” or “the devil,” who is called “Beelzebul,” “Bellar,” “the evil one,” “the accuser,” “the destroyer,” “the adversary” and “the enemy.”¹⁹ He also appears as “the prince of demons,” “the prince of this world,” and “the prince of the power of the air.” The New Testament is reserved in its statements about the principalities; it has no theoretical or speculative interest in them. It provides no description of the phenomena, and makes no attempt to differentiate among them or to arrange the names or appearances systematically. It would appear that the names given to the powers of evil are in large measure, interchangeable. One distinction is clearly [p. 58](#) drawn, namely, that the demons, spirits, angels, principalities and powers are regarded as subordinate to Satan or the devil. They are his innumerable powers seen as organized into a single empire (note especially [Mark 3:22–30](#); cf. [Luke 10:17f.](#); [Rev. 12:9, 16:13ff.](#)). They are manifestations of the devil’s power.

The New Testament teaches that the principalities and powers are kinds of personal beings. This is obvious from the names that they bear (they are called gods, princes and angels, while Satan is the prince of this world, the god of the world, the accuser, the adversary, the destroyer, etc.), and from the nature of their operations and activities. To speak of “personal beings” means that they “manifest themselves as beings of intellect and will, which can speak and be spoken to. They are something which is capable of purposeful activity.”²⁰ This is not to suggest that they are always encountered as individuals. Sometimes they are examples of a species (cf. [Mark 5:9](#), “My name is Legion for we are many”). The principalities are not only kinds of personal beings with will and intelligence, but also beings of power.

There are, in the New Testament, five stages in the drama of the principalities and powers and it may be convenient for us to mention these in order.

i Their original creation

In a passage already referred to, [Colossians 1:16](#), we noted that all things were created through Christ. That statement is amplified in the following words: “whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” The forces of tyranny that hold sway over men’s lives—and perhaps some of the Colossians were troubled by this—are, in fact, a part of creation and subject to Christ as Lord (cf. [Rom. 8:38,39](#)).

ii Their subsequent fall

Several passages in the New Testament refer to the subsequent fall of these supernatural authorities, e.g. [Jude 6](#) and [2 Peter 2:4](#). At the same time the hymnic passage of [Colossians 1:15–20](#) implies a serious dislocation or breach. Although there is no specific mention of it, a cosmic rupture of enormous proportions is implied, since the high point of the hymn

¹⁹ For details see H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (1961) and Roy Yates, “The Powers of Evil in the New Testament”, *EQ* 52 (1980), pp.97–111.

²⁰ Schlier, *Principalities and Powers*, p.18.

refers to the reconciling work of Christ, by which “all things” which have been created are now pacified in Christ’s death. [Colossians 2:15](#) is to be understood along similar lines for the principalities needed to be disarmed and their utter helplessness [p. 59](#) made plain to all since they had rebelled against their creator. They became independent and autonomous, manifesting a self-centredness that is in opposition to God and his power.

iii Christ’s defeat of the powers of evil

In most of the New Testament references to the powers of evil there is some mention of God or Christ’s supremacy or victory over them. Christ is supreme in the temptation. Driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, the traditional place of temptation and haunt of wild beasts, Jesus faces the Satanic onslaught ([Mark 1:13](#); [Matt. 4:1–11](#); [Luke 4:1–13](#)). He is victorious as he chooses the mission committed to him by God and which will finally be vindicated by the Father, even though it leads through suffering and humiliation. This victory over Satanic temptation is held up as an example and an encouragement to Christians in their perseverance in suffering ([Heb. 2–18](#); [4:15](#)).

Jesus is supreme over evil spirits. In the Beelzebul controversy it is made plain that it is by the finger ([Luke 11:20](#)) or Spirit of God ([Matt. 12–28](#)), not by the power of Beelzebul, that Jesus exorcizes the unclean spirits. He is the one through whom the kingdom of God operates to destroy the power of Satan ([Mark 3:23–26](#); [Matt. 12–26](#); [Luke 11:18](#)). He is able to enter the strong man’s house and plunder his goods ([Mark 3:27](#)). Every exorcism is a further spoiling of Satan’s goods and signifies his defeat. Jesus is also shown as delegating his power over evil spirits in his followers who then exercise it as his representatives ([Mark 3:14f](#); [6:7](#); [Matt. 10:1](#); [Luke 9:1f, 10:1](#)).

Christ’s victory over Satan and the powers of darkness occurs preeminently in his death, resurrection and exaltation. In John’s Gospel there is a clear and obvious connection between the defeat of Satan and the death of Jesus. “ ‘Now is the time for judgment on this world, now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” ([John 12:31–33](#), NIV). The same point about the victory over the evil powers at the cross is brought out in [Colossians 2:14, 15](#) (cf. [1:20](#); [Heb 2:14, 15](#)), as we have observed above. In [Ephesians 1:20–23](#); [4:7, 11](#) (cf. [1 Peter 3:19, 22](#)) the exaltation of Christ is proof that he is superior to the powers of darkness; he is Lord.

In these cases the victory of Christ over the powers of evil is asserted as a fact, and believers are called on to recognize the fact and live accordingly. So [Colossians 2:20](#); [3:1ff.](#) makes it plain that the Christians at Colossae have died and were raised with Christ out from the sphere of influence of the powers, and ought to live as those free [p. 60](#) from the binding rules and regulations.

The triumph of Christ over the principalities is a frequent theme of the New Testament. They have been overcome by him and condemned to await the final ruin of their power.

iv Their continued hostility

For the time being, however, the triumph of the crucified, risen and glorified Jesus Christ over the principalities is hidden. It is not yet final as far as the world is concerned. At this present moment the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, or to put it in the language of Ephesians the prince of the power of the air is the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient ([2:2](#)).

Although defeated foes the principalities and powers continue to exist, inimical to man and his interests. This is a reality even for the believer. The recipients of Peter’s first letter are exhorted to resist the devil and stand firm in the faith for he, their enemy, “prowls

around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” ([1 Peter 5:8](#)). [Ephesians 6:12](#) underscores the reality of our engagement with the powers of darkness. There will be no cessation of hostilities until our departure to be with Christ or his return, whichever is the sooner. Our struggle is not with human beings but with supernatural intelligences. Our enemies are not human but demonic who are powerful, wicked and cunning. But the power of God is stronger and we are to make use of it to the full ([Eph. 6:10ff.](#)), knowing that neither these powers nor anything else in the whole of creation will be able to separate us from God’s love ([Rom. 8:38f](#)).

v. Their final overthrow

If Satan and his hosts continue to exist in order to make war on the saints, then their time is short ([Rev. 20:3](#)). The final outcome is certain and their ultimate overthrow has been fixed by God, as [1 Corinthians 15:24–28](#) and the many references in Revelation make plain: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” ([Rev. 20:10](#)).

THE PRINCIPALITIES AND THE STRUCTURES

The powers of evil then are to be understood as personal, supernatural agencies. But what is their relationship to the structures, traditions, institutions, etc.? Can they use these things? Satan and his hosts exist by influencing the world and mankind at every level. Satanic power, though hidden, is no less real for all that. Satan works [P. 61](#) through the events of history ([1 Thess. 2:18](#), he hinders Paul; cf. the activity of Satan in the circumstances surrounding Job’s life). According to [Revelation 2:10](#) the devil will cast some believers into prison. The inherent distresses of life according to [Romans 8:38](#) are related to the evil powers mentioned in the same verse. In [Revelation 13](#) the devil exploits public and political life, having been given authority to make war against the saints (v. [7](#)).

According to [Colossians 2:20f](#), the elemental spirits of the universe made use of the legal demands of the false teachers in order to bring the Christians at Colossae into bondage. It would appear that social, political, judicial and economic structures can become demonic. This seems evident to anyone who has considered the state: in [Romans 13](#) it is the minister of God, while in [Revelation 13](#) it has become the ally of the devil.

But at this point we might well ask whether “structures” is the right word. The Biblical emphasis is that the powers of evil work in and through *people*, rather than impersonal structures. In speaking of the latter we are inclined to remove any responsibility for action from those who are responsible human agents.

Further, to identify “the powers” with human structures of one kind or another leads to several erroneous consequences. First, we do not have an adequate explanation as to why structures do not always become tyrannical. Second, we unjustifiably restrict our understanding of the malevolent activity of Satan, whereas he is too versatile to be limited to the structural. And this is the great weakness of the new theory with its identification (by some of its advocates) of the principalities with multi-national corporations and the like. Third, we become too negative towards society and its structures. For if we identify the powers of evil with the structures we will seek to dethrone them, or to fight against them. Advocates of the new theory may warn against defying the structures; they have to be warned against demonizing them. Both are extremes to be avoided. Some structures may be changed for good.

Who Speaks for the Church in China?

INTRODUCTION

Although attempts by Christians outside of mainland China to understand and interpret the history of the churches in China during the past thirty years are legion, it is very difficult to arrive at a balanced judgement. The central question is "Who speaks for the Church in China?" Is it the leaders of the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the Catholic Patriotic Association, the local leaders of the growing number of house churches or the Chinese and missiologists living outside of China? In his study paper for the workshop on China and Christianity at the International Association for Mission Studies (Bangalore 4–9 January, 1982) John C. England said, "when all the available knowledge is assembled we (and even some of our colleagues in China say this of themselves) know all too little. 'The sky' as a Chinese proverb reminds us, 'is not big to a frog at the bottom of the well'. An evangelical Chinese leader from Hong Kong suggested to me a few months ago that we should say less, pray more and trust in the sovereignty of God.

Evangelicals are anxious to know more about the phenomenal growth of house or home meetings during these 30 years and to better understand the perplexity of relationship between these groups and the Patriotic Associations—Protestant and Catholic. At the National Christian Conference in Nanjing, October 1980, held to establish the Christian Council of China, a number of leaders of home meetings were among the participants. John England concludes from reports available that there is a widespread openness and trust towards the work of the patriotic association and that there is evidence in many districts of large numbers of Christians who are enthusiastic in attending worship in both "homes" and the churches. He comments, "Services of worship, prayer and Bible study, whether in the open churches or in home meetings—Catholic or Protestant are noticeably biblical in content, 'spiritual' in the sense of carefully avoiding any political reference, and theologically or liturgically conservative". Further he suggests that an important factor in the extension of religious liberty has been "the continuing life of numberless Christian communities—in city and village, commune and neighbourhood—and the faithfulness of countless individual Christians in all the daily situation of work-place, community and political organisation. Deprived of all institutional or public facilities for Christian witness, colleagues in China have testified time and again to their rediscovery, not only of the home meeting, but also of the social dimension of Christian witness in the secular concerns of daily work and political participation". On the other hand, several reports suggest that there is a continuing tension between those p. 63 whose preaching concentrates on themes such as the reality of sin, the grace of Jesus Christ and the requirement of Christian belief and those who seek to grapple with the larger historical issues on the relationship of nature and grace, the relationship of the Christian faith and the social system, freedom and human rights.

Bishop K. H. Ting, the Chairman of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement and President of the China Christian Council, has outlined his position in "14