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8. The conflict was intensified but the unclean spirit came out ([Mk. 1:26](#)).
9. Jesus Christ knew that he was dealing with one spirit not several, despite the spirit's reference to 'us' ([Mk. 1:24, 25](#)).
10. Jesus Christ had to face the question of publicity ([Mk. 1:28](#)).

A study of the seven other accounts of the deliverances by the Lord Jesus Christ of possessed individuals endorses these principles and adds to them. The accounts, sometimes found in only one or two, or in all three of the synoptic gospels, are:

- a. The record of Mary of Magdalene from whom seven devils were cast out ([Mk. 16:9](#); [Lk. 8:2](#)).
- b. The healing of the woman bent double ([Lk. 13:10-17](#)).
- c. The deliverance of the epileptic boy ([Mt. 17:14-21](#); [Mk. 9:14-29](#); [Lk. 9:37-43](#)).
- d. The casting out of the dumb spirit ([Mt. 9:32-33](#); [Lk. 11:14](#)).
- e. The deliverance of the man with a blind and dumb spirit ([Mt. 12:22](#)).
- f. The deliverance of the man with many demons ([Mk. 5:1-20](#); [Lk. 8:26-33](#)). p. 352
- g. The casting out of an unclean spirit from a Syrophenician girl ([Mk. 7:24-30](#)).

Further principles emerging from a study of Jesus Christ's ministry and not noted in the analysis of the first incident ([Mk. 1:21-28](#)) are:

1. The repetition of the command to the evil spirit to come out of the person. In Greek the imperfect tense of the verb 'come out' is used in [Mark 5:8](#) to indicate repetition.
2. New Testament exorcisms were mostly carried out publicly wherever the need for them became apparent, for example, in the synagogue ([Mk. 1:23](#)) or in the open air. One exorcism was carried out when the sufferer was absent ([Mk. 7:24-30](#) compare [Mt. 15:21-28](#)).
3. The necessity of a person's being filled with the Holy Spirit after being emptied of evil. The Beelzebul controversy as recorded by Luke implies this ([Lk. 11:14-26](#)).
4. Jesus' exorcisms relate closely to faith and prayer ([Mk. 9:19, 29](#); see also [Mt. 17:17, 20](#); [Lk. 9:41](#)).
5. Jesus' rapid, accurate diagnosis is a striking feature of his authority, and his 'doing all things well' ([Mk. 7:37](#)).

Vivienne Stacey is a member of *Interserve* and works in the Middle East. p. 353

Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church

P. T. O'Brien

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We are printing this longer-than-usual article because in interpreting the Biblical concept, 'principalities and powers' for our contemporary world, it lucidly shows the influence of the

interpreter's own pre-understanding. It raises fundamental issues about our hermeneutical method on the relationship of myth to metaphor, symbol and analogy. Also, the article is fundamental to our theme, 'Christ and Cosmic Conflict'.

INTRODUCTION

The following study is an exegetical exercise which attempts to determine what the New Testament writers, and Paul in particular, meant by the phrase, 'principalities and powers', and its equivalents. At the same time the paper is a study in hermeneutics and the history of interpretation, for these and related phrases have been widely used in a variety of ways within contemporary theology. They function to define the concerns and mission of the Church and are currently being applied in diverse political, cultural and ideological circumstances. Ronald Sider, for example, recently 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' are consistent with a recent trend among contemporary theologians. Are this and other diverse usages of the New Testament references to the powers legitimate? And what **P. 354** hermeneutical presuppositions are (implicitly or explicitly) appealed to in order to generate such conclusions?

The purpose of this study, which seeks to probe into these and related questions, is fourfold: first, to provide a brief history of interpretation indicating how major interpreters since the end of the nineteenth century have understood Paul's references to the powers. Second, special attention will be paid to the significant hermeneutical presuppositions of these writers as well as the principles of interpretation used by them. Next we shall attempt to enunciate the main lines of the New Testament teaching on the powers, though in the nature of the case our remarks will necessarily be brief. Finally, some brief concluding remarks will be made about the relationship of the powers to the structures.

I. THE DEBATE OVER THE POWERS IN RECENT THEOLOGY

(a) Isolated References in the Nineteenth Century

During the nineteenth century little attention was paid to the principalities and powers as part of Paul's teaching. Statements about the powers were either read as a confirmation of the conventional orthodox doctrine about angels and devils, or else they were seen as the last vestiges of an antiquated mythology in Pauline thought with which more enlightened ages need waste no time. The quote of Otto Everling³ is pertinent: 'the utterly subordinate significance of this segment of Paul's thought world seems to have become too generally axiomatic for one to give serious attention to it.'⁴

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

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ In the introduction to his *Die paulinische Angelologie und Dämonologie* (Göttingen, 1988), p. 4.

⁴ Quoted by H. Berkof, *Christ and the Powers* (ET. Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1962), p. 72.

The older liberal theologians of the nineteenth century, regarding the cosmology of the New Testament as essentially mythical and obsolete in character, thought they could safely eliminate it along with all other mythological elements. They distinguished between the essence of religion and the temporary garb which is assumed. The kerygma was reduced to Harnack, as a representative example, to a few basic principles of religion and ethics which are timeless and eternal. Although it is only within concrete historical processes that they are realized, we are all capable of verifying them in our own experience at whatever period we happen to live. References, then, to the p. 355 principalities and powers in Pauline thought are eliminated as part of that antiquated mythology.?

(b) The History of Religions School

Representatives of the History of Religions school were the first to discover the extent to which the New Testament is permeated by mythology.⁵ For them the importance of these documents lay not in their *teaching* about religion and ethics but in the *actual* religion and piety. All the mythological imagery with its apparent objectivity was either of secondary importance or else completely negligible. Martin Dibelius' work on the spirit-world in the thought of Paul⁶ was a product of this school. In a detailed piece of scholarship he placed Paul's expressions in the context of contemporary religious thought. Following Everling Dibelius sought to show: that a world dominated by supernatural forces was central to Paul's thinking; that these forces were hostile to mankind; and that this was the framework within which Paul developed his views about man's existence and the work of Christ. Dibelius considered Paul's uniqueness lay in his belief that the powers were conquered in Christ. But the mythological imagery itself was of value only from the viewpoint of comparative religion. Since in our time 'ideas of spirits and devils' are 'in the process of disappearing' the language of the powers has no meaning for us. So we must get to the essence of Paul's message concerning man's existence and Christ's work. The high-water mark of the apostle's teaching was the experience of mystical union with Christ, in whom God took symbolic form.

(c) Bultmann and the Existentialist Approach

If little attention was paid to the powers in Pauline thought during the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth, then in the 1930s a change occurred. A number of German theologians, after the rise of p. 356 Nazism, began reading the relevant Pauline texts in a new way. Heinrich Schlier, one of the first to consider that these passages found a strong resonance in the atmosphere of the times, as early as 1930 observed that although the background of the Pauline conception of the powers had been studied in the context of

⁵ Many influential scholars representing this viewpoint came to the conclusion that not only did Christianity have its own myths, but also it had been significantly influenced at its formative stage by particular myths of other religions, esp. those of Jewish apocalyptic, of Gnosticism and of the Hellenistic mystery religions; note the treatment of J. D. G. Dunn, 'Demythologizing—the Problem of Myth in the New Testament', in *New Testament Interpretation. Essays in Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), pp. 285–307.

⁶ *Die Geisterwelt in Glauben des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1909).

comparative religion, 'we have generally neglected even to ask whether Scripture and Christian tradition might be thinking of definite life experiences when they speak of the devil and the demons.'⁷ For Schlier the powers were not objective realities but projections of what we might call, with Bultmann, man's 'self-understanding'. Schlier was later to change his own theological position⁸ but his contribution at this point of time was important since it gave expression to an existential understanding of the principalities and powers.

Bultmann himself had understood the powers as expressions, on the one hand, of man's inability to control his world and the future, and, on the other, in terms of the New Testament's call for existential emancipation.⁹ What hermeneutical principles had led Bultmann to arrive at these conclusions? Central to his hermeneutic in relation to the New Testament was his understanding of myth.¹⁰ For Bultmann the gospel is not separate or distinct from myth; rather, it is embodied in the mythical language of the New Testament. To discard the myth is to discard the gospel itself. Bultmann uses myth in three distinct though related ways (these are not necessarily fully compatible with each other): first, myth is a way of speaking 'of the other world in terms of this world, and of the gods in terms derived from human life'.¹¹ Second, myth explains unusual phenomena in terms of the invasion of supernatural forces. It is necessarily bound up with a primitive or prescientific way of looking at the world. So Bultmann writes: [p. 357](#)

The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storeyed structure, with the earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the world underneath. Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings ... The underworld is hell ... The earth ... is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his demons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that men think and will and do.¹²

This particular view of myth had a long history, stemming from the period of the enlightenment, and it persisted in the intellectual circles in which Bultmann moved. Mythical thinking, then, was essentially uncritical thinking.

Bultmann's third concept of myth may be discerned in his statement: 'The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially'.¹³ These three distinguishable accounts of myth Bultmann sought to hold together. As understood by him myth is almost all-embracing and includes, for example, not only the three-decker

⁷ Cited by Berkhof, *Christ*, p. 73.

⁸ The above-mentioned statement does not appear in the later English Translation, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1961).

⁹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* 1 [ET. London: SCM, 1952], pp. 258f.; cf. the recent article, part of which is devoted to the theme of the Pauline powers, by L. Bautista, H. B. Garcia and Sze-Kar Wan, 'The Asian Way of Thinking in Theology' *ERT* 6 (1982), pp. 37–49, esp. p. 43.

¹⁰ In this analysis of Bultmann's hermeneutics I am especially indebted to A. C. Thiselton's writings, especially *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), pp. 252ff.

¹¹ Thiselton, *Horizons*, p. 252.

¹² 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (ET. London: SPCK, 1972, 1972) p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

view of the universe, miracles, God's sending his Son in the fullness of time, the resurrection of Christ as an event, and all statements about future eschatology, but also those motifs which have particular reference to our theme, viz. demon possession and the notion that supernatural powers influence the course of history.

Bultmann next enunciates the task facing the Christian interpreter of the New Testament. It is not that of trying to 'save the kerygma by selecting some of its features and subtracting others, and thus reduce the amount of mythology in it'.¹⁴ Nor is it with the older liberal theologians to regard mythology as relative and temporary and therefore to eliminate it altogether while retaining only the broad, basic principles of religion and ethics. Instead, the New Testament itself, for the following reasons, compels us to engage in the task of demythologization,¹⁵ that is, of reinterpreting the mythological elements along existential lines: first, its mythological language is really intended to speak of human existence and to challenge man to a new self-understanding p. 358 and existential decision. Second, various myths within the New Testament contradict each other, thus demonstrating that myth is no more than a way of speaking. Third, the process of demythologizing has already begun in the New Testament itself, especially in the way eschatological language is handled. So, to engage in the hermeneutical task of demythologizing is not to reject Scripture but the world-view of Scripture, which is the world-view of a past epoch. By demythologizing the interpreter will eliminate false stumbling-blocks and 'bring into sharp focus the real stumbling-block, the word of the cross'.¹⁶

Käsemann, in his paper entitled 'The Eschatological Royal Reign of God', which he read at the 1980 Melbourne W.C.C. conference, carried through Bultmann's hermeneutical principles consistently with reference to the principalities and powers. He acknowledged that when the New Testament referred to these authorities it seemed to indicate that they were personal. It was necessary, however, according to Käsemann to 'criticize and demythologize the language and ideas of an antique world-view as out of date ... since only in this way can we have a true perception of the reality of our contemporary life and present world' (p. 4). Käsemann then reinterpreted the Pauline statements and understood them to refer to *particular* demonic structures which need to be exorcized in the name of Christ.

By way of response it is not our intention to attempt a comprehensive critique of Bultmann's hermeneutics. Our aims are much more limited. But the following need to be noted in-as-much as they bear on contemporary interpretation of the Pauline references to the principalities and powers. In many respects Bultmann's existentialist interpretation crystallizes, though it develops beyond, previous scholarly assessments of the powers. At the same time the current debate cannot be adequately understood apart from his contribution. We may not be entirely satisfied with Bultmann's answers. But there is no doubt that he has raised some relevant questions in their most acute form.

(i) On the positive side, it is noted that Bultmann's hermeneutics is 'never *only* a matter of understanding, but also of *hearing* and of *appropriation*'.¹⁷ Its purpose is to bring about encounter and dialogue. And although one may have serious questions about his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ On the antecedents to Bultmann's demythologizing see especially Thiselton, *Horizons*, pp. 205ff., and Dunn, in *Interpretation*, p. 289.

¹⁶ R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (ET. London: SCM, 1960), pp. 35f.

¹⁷ Thiselton, *Horizons*, p. 287.

demythologizing the presupposition of such a reconstruction is that the New Testament writings have something to say to the present.

(ii) Bultmann has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to [p. 359](#) the issue of the interpreter's 'pre-understanding' as he approaches the text of the New Testament. He has argued that there is no neutral or pre-suppositionless exegesis, so that the hermeneutical task is a circular one, with constant interaction between object and subject, text and interpreter. In this dialectical process he claims there can be no finality, only an approximation to the truth of the Word of God in a particular culture or situation. The interpreter's pre-understanding is the critical factor in this process.¹⁸ But Bultmann himself has been criticized by N. A. Dahl for 'absolutiz[ing] ... his philosophical "pre-understanding" in such a way that he decides in advance what the New Testament writings may or may not really say'.¹⁹ Even if Dahl's criticism is not wholly correct regarding Bultmann's *view* of pre-understanding (and the latter recognizes that pre-understanding is a starting point which must be corrected in the light of the text), the way in which he has let his own pre-understanding be shaped in *practice* is certainly open to criticism.²⁰ In effect his pre-understanding is essentially a pre-commitment to an existentialist interpretation of the gospel, resurrection, eschatology, and the powers, etc., in a twentieth century Western cultural context.

(iii) Serious questions and criticisms have been raised about Bultman's three-fold understanding of myth. On the one hand it is considered his *concept* of myth is too all-embracing.²¹ It confuses myth and analogy and if pressed makes it in effect impossible to speak of God at all. Bultmann recognized that it was legitimate to talk of 'God as Creator' by analogy, but once he allows this, is it not possible to argue that much of the so-called 'mythological language' of the New Testament is metaphor, symbol or analogy after all? Several scholars have cautioned us about assuming the biblical writers necessarily used mythical imagery uncritically. Albright, for example, insists that they no more thought of heaven as literally 'up' than the modern man thinks of the sun as literally 'rising'. Minear has concluded that the author of the Apocalypse did not believe naively in a three-decker universe, while others have argued that myth is to be understood not as an outmoded primitive world-view, but as vivid imagery which functions with an [p. 360](#) inner logic. It is 'not a thing of the past, but characterizes man in any epoch'.²² Further, the belief about supernatural interventions in the affairs of men is not necessarily primitive or pre-scientific, as the Enlightenment view of myth would imply. Pannenberg has rightly asserted: 'The acceptance of divine intervention in the course of events ... is fundamental to every religious understanding of the world, including one which is not mythical in the sense in which comparative religion uses the term'.²³ And pertinently he adds that even belief in demons is not specifically mythical. It is clear that these last points are

¹⁸ On the importance of pre-understanding, in relation to the New Testament text, together with important safeguards see G. N. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism', in *Interpretation* pp. 60–71; cf. also B. J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), pp. 40ff.

¹⁹ N. A. Dahl, *The Crucified Christ and Other Essays* (ET. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), p. 97, cited by Thiselton, *Horizons*, p. 283.

²⁰ Thiselton, *Horizons*, p. 283.

²¹ Dunn, in *Interpretation*, p. 297.

²² So Karl Jaspers, cited by Thiselton, *Horizons*, p. 289.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

particularly significant for other interpreters besides those within the Bultmannian existentialist school.

(iv) On the other hand, if Bultmann's definition of myth is too all-embracing, then paradoxically his *understanding* of the *truth* of myth is too narrow. He has been attacked by his more radical disciples for not carrying through his demythologizing programme further. If 'the self understanding of the man of faith is really the constant in the New Testament'²⁴ then where does Christology really fit in? If faith relates to man's possibility of authentic existence then this can not be tied exclusively to Christ. Critics from the right have argued that Bultmann has reduced theology to anthropology, or at the least Christology to soteriology. And as far as the Pauline principalities are concerned Bultmann's reductionist interpretation leads him to assert:

He [Paul] is thereby only expressing a *certain understanding of existence*: The spirit powers *represent* the reality into which man is placed as one full of conflicts and struggle, a reality which threatens and tempts.²⁵

The objective, malevolent activity of Satan and his minions has been effectively reduced, even removed, through this demythologizing programme.

(d) Cullmann's Two-fold Interpretation: Angelic Powers and Civil Authorities

We next turn to the important and influential contribution of Oscar Cullmann to the subject. Cullmann addressed himself to the question of the *exousiai* ('authorities') in [Rom. 13:1](#).²⁶ To whom does this term [p. 361](#) refer? It is, of course, clear that the civil authorities are being spoken about. What has been in dispute is whether there is in *exousias* a double reference—that is, not only to the civil authorities but also the angelic powers standing behind, and action through these civil authorities. The suggestion of a double reference goes back to Martin Dibelius (who, however, later abandoned it) and, in addition to Cullmann, it was taken up by K. L. Schmidt, G. Dehn, K. Barth and others. Cullmann argued that the two-fold interpretation was 'thoroughly justified as an hypothesis, from the standpoints of philosophy, Judaistic concepts, and the early Christian and Pauline theology'.²⁷ His reasons²⁸ were as follows:

(i) Whenever *exousia* occurs in the Pauline letters in the plural or in the plurally used singular with *pasa* (except for [Tit 3:1](#)) it clearly signifies invisible angelic powers (1 Cor. [Eph. 1:21](#); [3:10](#); [6:12](#); [Col. 1:16](#); [2:10](#), [15](#); cf. [1 Pet. 3:22](#)).

(ii) The subjection of the powers is a central dogma of the primitive Christian confession and therefore of Pauline thought.

(iii) [1 Cor. 2:8](#) is a strong ground for the double reference to both spiritual and human forces, while in [1 Cor. 6:1ff.](#) the mention of angels in connection with the litigation by Christians in the civil courts is best explained by reference to the idea of the civil authorities as the executive agents of angel powers.

²⁴ H. Braun, cited by Dunn, in *Interpretation*, p. 298.

²⁵ *Theology* 1, p. 259, our italics.

²⁶ He expressed his views in *Christ and Time* (ET. London: SCM, 1951) and subsequently in *The State in the New Testament* (ET. London: SCM, 1957). Note especially the excursus in the latter volume, pp. 95–114.

²⁷ *State*, p. 114.

²⁸ Note C. E. B. Cranfield's treatment in *A Commentary on Romans 12–13* (Edinburgh: Oliver, 1965), pp. 66f., and more recently *The Epistle to the Romans* 11 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1979), pp. 657f.

(iv) Early Christianity shared with late Judaism the belief that invisible powers were at work behind the earthly phenomena; especially there was a firm belief in the angels of the nations.

Considerable opposition to Cullmann's theory was voiced by a number of critics on linguistic, exegetical, historical and dogmatic grounds. C. D. Morrison²⁹ charted the course of the debate, and the more important objections brought against the theory are as follows:

(i) The term *exousia* is not accompanied here by *arche* nor does it form part of a list of (at least two) terms. The occurrence at [Rom. 13:1](#) thus differs from all others in the Pauline corpus whenever it refers to spiritual powers.

(ii) Unlike other passages in Paul that have reference to the powers, [Rom. 13](#) is not explicitly concerned with the work of Christ. [p. 362](#)

(iii) Cullmann has drawn too much out of the text of [1 Cor. 2:8](#) in understanding the rulers as both human and spiritual forces.³⁰

(iv) There is no evidence in the New Testament that the hostile spiritual powers were re-commissioned, after being subdued, to a positive service of Christ. If this was followed logically it would suggest that in Christ the powers themselves rule the believer. Quite the reverse. In being united to Christ believers are no longer subject to the spiritual powers of the world (cf. [Col. 2:20](#)).

(v) Paul's teaching in [Rom. 13:1-7](#) is best understood against an Old Testament prophetic, apocalyptic and wisdom tradition of God's appointment and use of human rulers for his own purposes.

Although Morrison³¹ furthered Cullman's hypothesis by seeking to prove that 'a common Graeco-Roman concept of the State' by which rulers were 'divinely appointed in relation to a cosmic system of spiritual powers' was shared alike by the Graeco-Roman world, Hellenistic Jews and early Christians and therefore is an assumption lying behind Paul's use of *exousiais* in [Rom. 13:1](#), serious doubts have been raised against it. The fact that nowhere in the New Testament is the relationship between civil rulers and spiritual powers explicitly affirmed is, *contra* Morrison, reason for doubting its presence.³²

(e) Ethical and Socio-Political Structures

We have already noted that a number of German theologians, during the period between the two world wars and especially after the rise of Nazism, began reading the Pauline texts about the powers in a new light. In the English-speaking context this discussion arose after World War II. As a post-war theory it assumed 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. The exponents of this increasingly fashionable theory were all Western or Western-trained theologians, and this of course raises the question as to whether they were predisposed

²⁹ *The Powers That Be. Earthly Rulers and Demonic Powers in Romans 13:1-7* (London: SCM, 1960), esp. pp. 40ff.

³⁰ Note the recent assessment by W. Carr, *Angels and Principalities, The background, meaning and development of Pauline phrase hai archai kai hai exousiai* (Cambridge: University, 1981), pp. 118-120.

³¹ *Powers*, pp. 63-101.

³² Cranfield in his more recent *Romans*, p. 659, has stated that he now regards the double reference interpretation as less probable than the view that Paul had in mind simply the civil authorities at [Romans 13:1](#).

culturally to interpret the expressions [p. 363](#) of Paul along definite structural lines. Certainly the number of third world theologians writing on and reflecting this viewpoint was not large.

On this recent view 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.'³³

In the following analysis we draw attention to the major contributions and later comment on the relevant hermeneutical principles:

(i) Gordon Rupp³⁴ 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 late 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'.³⁵ However, without any exegetical justification he 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 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.³⁶

(ii) Hendrik Berkhof's monograph, *Christ and the Powers*,³⁷ has been influential in this debate (for example, note Yoder's indebtedness). 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 [p. 364](#) existence.³⁸ 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'.³⁹ 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

³³ J. R. W. Stott, *God's New Society. The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1979), p. 271.

³⁴ *Principalities and Powers. Studies in the Christian Conflict in History* (London: Epworth, 1952).

³⁵ Pp. 11f.

³⁶ Cf. also the writings of W. Stringfellow, especially *Free in Obedience. The Radical Christian Life* (New York: Seabury 1964), pp. 49ff.)

³⁷ (ET. Scottdale, Pa.: 1962).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

illusion' has been struck from their hands.⁴⁰ 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'⁴¹ 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](#).

(iii) The contribution of Amos N. Wilder, to this debate, an article entitled 'Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics',⁴² has given a fresh and clear rationale for the place of the principalities and powers in a 'kerygmatic social ethic'. Wilder concedes that quantitatively the New Testament says little about politics, economics and the structure of social institutions. Qualitatively, however, it contains highly significant material. Wilder is concerned to find a truly scriptural basis for social ethics. He is not satisfied with a 'general undifferentiated summons to obedience or love', which he says is 'an impoverishment of the biblical ethic' and 'an unwarrantable assumption'. Recent biblical theological insights have placed this matter of social ethics in a new light so that it is now possible to set forth a kerygmatic social ethic using the whole [p. 365](#) Bible as a basis rather than some narrow dimension such as the social ideals of the prophets or Jesus. The kerygma with its appeal to the saving events of the divine operation in history and to the promise and fulfilment motif provides a genuinely biblical basis for this social ethics. Wilder then turns specifically to the Pauline statements about 'the principalities and powers' and 'the rulers of the world'. He claims the apostle is using mythological language to describe 'the victory of the gospel over the tyrants of this world, its false authorities'.⁴³ The apostle's language and perspective must be demythologized or 'translated into contemporary terms without forfeiting the evangelical substance'.⁴⁴ Wilder, however, distinguishes this demythologizing from Bultmann's programme of 'existential interpretation', because he believes the latter's individualistic and ahistorical approach cannot do justice to the full dimensions of the New Testament message.

For Wilder the mythological-eschatological victory over the cosmic tyrants in the cross of Christ ([Col. 2:15](#)) is not concluded. 'This struggle continues in the eschatological experience of the church itself, only to have its final conclusion at the return of Christ'.⁴⁵ And how can this struggle be described? To answer in non-mythological terms, it is a conflict with 'the structural elements of unregenerate society, the false authorities of culture. The dethroning of such authorities and the weakening of such power principles constitute the central tasks of Christian social action'.⁴⁶

Paul has used the language of his time to describe what we call secular error, secular false gods, the idols of the market place, etc. These are 'the rulers of this age which are

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 38f. Note also Stott, *God's New Society*, p. 269, and especially his clear and incisive analysis of the recent debate (pp. 267–275) about the Pauline powers being interpreted as ethical and socio-political structures.

⁴¹ Stott, *ibid.*, p. 269.

⁴² First published in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube. (Cambridge: University, 1964), pp. 509–536. Reprinted as *Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966). References below are to the later edition.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

passing away'. When the Christian Church attacks these false authorities in culture and politics it is engaged in a strategic attack upon the corrupted structures of society, that is, against 'the world-rulers of this darkness' ([Eph. 6:12](#)).

(f) Structures and Unseen Spiritual Forces—A Conservative Viewpoint

From this broad category several recent writers representing a conservative theological standpoint need to be considered. Each has been influenced by the work of Berkhoff, while at the same time they take the debate still further in a 'political' direction. Each interprets the powers in a two-fold way, i.e. the principalities are regarded as *both* [p. 366](#) the socio-political structures of human society *and* the unseen spiritual forces lying behind these structures. In observing a double significance they differ formally from the position of Rupp, Wilder, etc. Materially, however, the differences with these latter writers are not great, for once they have conceded Paul's 'powers' refer *also* to unseen spiritual forces,⁴⁷ their whole emphasis falls upon the principalities as structures, especially of a political kind.

(i) The treatment of the Pauline principalities and powers by John Howard Yoder⁴⁸ is set within a wider context of Christian social ethics in which the author advocates a specific kind of pacifism (which he calls 'revolutionary subordination') and 'a theologically coherent radical attitude toward society'. Yoder argues that biblical scholarship over the last generation has come to a striking degree of clarity and unanimity⁴⁹ regarding the 'powers'. He thus seeks 'not to [explicate] ... the Pauline doctrine of the powers ... but to [illuminate] ... the way in which this doctrine meshes with modern understandings and questions'.⁵⁰ His study, then, is not a work of exegesis, though he would claim that it is exegetically based and hermeneutically valid.

Yoder decisively rejects the view, held by so many earlier and present day scholars, that Paul's teaching on the powers is 'archaic or meaningless ... [Rather it] reveals itself to be a very refined analysis of the problems of society and history'. In fact, it is 'far more refined than the other ways in which theologians have sought to describe the same realities in terms only of "creation" or "personality" '.⁵¹ Paul, in his references to 'principalities and powers', 'thrones and dominions', [p. 367](#) etc., was using language of political colour. The relevance of this language to 'the institutions and ideologies of our times need not imply the rejection of all the more literal meanings which the language of

⁴⁷ G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers. A Study in Pauline Theology*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) drew attention to three structures: first, 'pagan religion and pagan power' including the state; second, the law which is 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. But twenty years later, in his more recent commentary on Ephesians Caird shifted his ground by conceding that Paul was referring to 'spiritual beings' which operated in and through the structures, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: University, 1976), p. 91.

Similarly, Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall. A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Collins, 1960), identified the principalities with structures but later said the terms referred to spiritual entities as well, *Ephesians 11* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), p. 800. For further reading see G. H. C. Macgregor, 'Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought', *NTS* 1 (1954–55), pp. 17–28, and A. vanden Heuvel, *These Rebellious Powers* (London: SCM, 1966).

⁴⁸ *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137f., 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

the demonic and of bondage can also have'.⁵² But such a statement appears to be simply a concession on Yoder's part. For him the powers are pre-eminently the structures, institutions and ideologies of our times, a point which comes out clearly in his later exposition.

The author examines the issue of political involvement in the context of the Christian's attitude towards the civil order. In his dealing with the issue of a responsible political involvement which is compatible with the Anabaptist understanding of discipleship, Yoder speaks of 'revolutionary subordination' and 'accepting powerlessness'. The liberating power of the gospel eradicates the patterns of domination and submission. 'Revolutionary subordination', the proper Christian posture toward the civil order, is based in part on the Pauline advice to women and slaves as well as the manner in which he advises Christians to relate to the state. Significant for our purposes, however, is that the whole question of the Christian's political involvement, with its 'revolutionary subordination' and 'accepting powerlessness', is integrally related to the confrontation with the powers which took place in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to Yoder 'the proper Christian posture toward the civil order cannot be decided on the basis of a theocratic conception or an appeal to general political obligations ... these patterns must finally be judged in the light of the cross of Christ'.⁵³ The Christian's submission to the state grows out of an attempt to imitate the work of Christ on the cross. It is, he adds, 'only at one point, only on one subject—but then consistently, universally—is Jesus our example: in his cross'.⁵⁴

Space prevents us from examining Yoder's position in detail. However, three brief criticisms, relating to the overall purposes of this essay, may be made. First, we cannot 'consistently and universally' imitate the work of Christ on the cross.⁵⁵ Second, it may be seriously questioned whether Christ's death on the cross provides a pattern for the Christian's political involvement at all. Third, Yoder describes Jesus' relationship to the powers as one of 'subordination'. His work is characterized by 'the voluntary subordination of one who knows that [p. 368](#) another regime is normative'.⁵⁶ But 'subordination' describes Jesus' relationship to the Father. He was victorious over the powers in his cross, not subordinate to them in some revolutionary way. The New Testament consistently interprets the clash with the forces of darkness at the cross as denoting Jesus' victory over them ([Col. 2:15](#); cf. [In. 12:30](#); [Heb. 2:14](#)). One wonders whether Yoder has been influenced by his own background and, in particular, Mennonite notions of pacifism when he views our Lord's death in this way.

(ii) Richard Mouw's treatment of the powers, like that of Yoder, is set within the context of political questions. In his volume, *Politics and the Biblical Drama*,⁵⁷ he contends that to discuss theology is to raise political issues. In particular the questions he raises (What is the 'kingly' task of the Christian community? and, Is it permissible for Christians to attempt to gain political power?) lead him to an examination of the Pauline references to 'principalities and powers'. He then helpfully surveys the literature produced on this

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 141f.

⁵³ R. J. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 111.

⁵⁴ Yoder, *Politics*, p. 97; cf. Mouw, *Politics*, p. 112.

⁵⁵ Note Mouw's detailed criticisms, *Politics*, pp. 112–116.

⁵⁶ Yoder, *Politics*, p. 192.

⁵⁷ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

theme in the two decades prior to 1976, noting the following points of consensus: (a) Paul believed in a plurality of created spiritual powers. (b) Although drawing on a biblical tradition the apostle went beyond the Old Testament by ‘depersonalizing’ the powers, partially at least (note the indebtedness to Berkhof).⁵⁸ They may now be identified with national or racial groupings, religious doctrine, moral rules, technology, sexual desires, altruism, etc. However, Mouw does recognize the problems of demythologizing Paul’s language and wonders whether the apostle’s statements do ‘commit us to the belief that there is an “ontological” or “causal” residue that exists “over and above” observable individual and sociological factors’.⁵⁹ In other words, to what extent does Paul’s language commit us to regarding them as personal spiritual beings? (c) The powers exercise their influence in the regular patterns and structures of social life. This is not to suggest, however, that ‘political leaders are demon possessed or communing with the spirits in some popular sense of these phrases’.⁶⁰ (d) As created instruments of God the powers were intended to assist man’s orderly existence, but now subsequent to the fall they present themselves to us as possible objects of idolatry.

Mouw also recognizes several areas of disagreement in the current p. 369 debate over the powers: (a) How many references does Paul actually make to the principalities? (b) How has the redemptive work of Christ affected the status of the powers? That is, in what sense have they been overthrown and yet continue to exist, inimical to man and his interests? (c) How does the Christian community relate to the powers in the light of Christ’s redemptive work?

The author also notes that in previous discussions of the powers writers begin by describing the scope of the topic in very general terms; but they almost always apply it to the political realm alone. While Mouw himself recognizes the need for study and application in other areas he himself recognizes the need for study and application in other areas he proceeds to do the same thing! Finally, in a lengthy section dealing with the powers and political involvement Mouw interacts in detail with Yoder’s presentation. This debate is set within the Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue and, while rejecting Yoder’s specific recommendations regarding ‘revolutionary subordination’ and ‘accepting powerlessness’, he concedes that the latter’s work, *The Politics of Jesus*, with its treatment of the Pauline powers, adds significantly to our understanding of the political message of the New Testament. Mouw concludes that we do not need to face death in the way Jesus did, nor confront the powers after the manner of his work on the cross. ‘His was *the* confrontation with the Powers—the means of their ultimate defeat’.⁶¹ What then is the responsibility of the Christian in the light of Christ’s victory? We do not need to fear the powers because of Christ’s encounter with them; rather, we can now enter their domain and engage in political activity ‘seeking to promote justice and righteousness in the confidence that they cannot separate us from God’s love’. But what has happened to the preaching of the gospel and the turning of people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God? Is all this subsumed under a political message?

(g) Principalities and Powers: Angels Serving God, not Hostile Supernatural Authorities

⁵⁸ Mouw, *Politics*, 87.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

The most recent examination of our subject, the Pauline principalities and powers, is also the most thorough and comprehensive exegetical treatment to date. I refer to the Cambridge S.N.T.S. Monograph of Wesley Carr, entitled *Angels and Principalities* and published by C.U.P. in 1981. As the sub-title suggests this work is concerned with the background, meaning and development of Paul's phrase 'the [p. 370](#) powers and authorities'. Carr challenges the commonly accepted scholarly opinion that Paul and his contemporaries inhabited a world thought to be dominated by hostile superhuman powers, of whom Jews and Gentiles alike lived in fear. Like many previous scholars Carr began his study with an examination of the pre-Christian Jewish and pagan background to the apostle's thought. But his conclusions are very different from those of his predecessors. He claims that in the Jewish writings up to the mid-first century A.D. terms such as *archai*, *exousiai* and *dunameis* are confined to the angels and archangels of Yahweh and are never used of demonic forces. The few references in paganism during this period to angels and powers have no clear point of contact with Paul's work. From his study of the background material Carr concludes that 'the concept of might forces that are hostile to man, from which he sought relief, was not prevalent in the thought world of the first century A.D.'.⁶²

In the central part of his book Carr examined the major Pauline texts under the headings: the powers and Christ triumphant ([Col. 1:16](#); [2:14f.](#), [18](#); [Php. 2:10](#); the 'enemies' of [Ps. 110:1](#)), the powers and the spiritual world ([Rom. 8:38f.](#) and references in Ephesians), and the powers in relation to the political world ([Rom. 13:1-7](#); [1 Cor. 2:6-8](#); [6:1ff.](#)). The principalities and powers, according to Carr, are to be understood in a good sense of spiritual beings which are in a positive relationship to God. The reference in Colossians and Ephesians (except [6:12](#)) contribute to the Christology of the two letters 'not by pointing to any achievement of Christ in battle hostile powers, but by associating him with God as the one who receives the recognition and worship of the heavenly host'.⁶³ At [Rom. 13](#) and [1 Cor. 2](#) *exousiai* refers simply to human authorities, while [1 Cor. 6:1ff.](#), with its reference to angels, in no way contributes to the interpretation of [Rom. 13:1](#). Carr argues that Paul's usage of the language of the powers and associated terms conforms of basic Jewish usage. Further, this terminology would have conveyed to the Gentile readers of Paul's letter notions of power and authority that are associated with God rather than with hostile forces.

However, according to Carr, a development took place in Christian thinking about the powers after the time of Paul. The interpretation of the work of Christ as a defeat of hostile powers is certainly found in Christian thought by the end of the second century A.D. There is a humanizing and psychologizing of the powers after the mid-first century in which magic divination, idols, planets and fate played their [p. 371](#) part. The climax of this development occurred in Origen with whom there is a reinterpretation of the Pauline texts and development in the doctrine of the atonement.

But, Carr concludes, this was far from being a fundamental part of the background and proclamation of the Christian message. The idea of mighty forces of evil being ranged against man was not part of the earliest Christian understanding of the world and the gospel. If Carr's conclusions are correct, then his study has important ramifications for the contemporary debate about the meaning and relevance of the Pauline powers. Bultmann and many of his followers concluded Paul's language needed to be demythologized. Carr

⁶² Carr, *Angels*, p. 43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

contends, in effect, that the language of evil powers does not need to be demythologized at all, since the principalities are good not evil.

In spite of the many fresh insights of Carr's monograph one must conclude that his work fails to convince for the following reasons:

(i) There is still no consensus among scholars regarding the precise significance of the Jewish and pagan background material to the Pauline statements about the powers. All sorts of contrasting conclusions have been drawn from the time of Dibelius through Cullmann and Morrison up to the present with Carr's monograph. This most recent work makes claims that, at best, are only provisional. Certainly Carr's reading of the texts runs counter to the commonly accepted scholarly opinion that Paul and his contemporaries inhabited a world believed to be dominated by hostile superhuman powers, of whom Jews and Gentiles alike lived in fear. Further scholarly interaction and careful assessment are called for.

(ii) A major weakness of many of the studies of this Pauline theme of the powers is the limited nature of their investigation, and Carr's work is no exception. The issue of the Pauline principalities ought to be set not only against the contemporary background of first century Palestine but also within the wider framework of the holy war tradition in Scripture, including both Old Testament relating to the God who fights and the renewal of that war tradition in the ministry of Jesus in the New. The author's inability to see that the demons which Jesus confronted in the Gospels have anything to do with the principalities and powers of Paul's letters is a serious weakness (see below). Carr's monograph fails because it is not set within or checked against an integrated biblical theology.⁶⁴ p. 372

(iii) At an exegetical level Carr's handling of [Col. 2:14f.](#),⁶⁵ and other Pauline texts was in our judgment unsatisfactory. Admittedly [Col. 2:14f.](#) is a notoriously difficult crux and on a number of exegetical issues scholars have been divided, e.g. the relationship of the forgiveness in v. [13](#) to what follows; whether or not we have a hymnic fragment; if so, its relationship to the context; the meaning and nature of the *cheirographon*, etc. But Carr has erred in removing every note of conflict from the passage and therefore of rejecting any idea of victory over or defeat of alien enemy powers.

(iv) This criticism is confirmed when we note the author's handling of [Eph. 6:12](#). He is obliged to say that the verse is unlikely to have been part of the original Pauline text since it represents a departure or declension from his notion of the Christian life and of the nature of the world. There is no textual evidence in support of this contention. Since the text as it stands does not fit Carr's reconstruction we must conclude that his understanding of Paul's thought, at this point, is incorrect. Not all the powers are 'goodies' even though Carr thinks they are.

(v) Finally, questions must therefore be raised as to whether Carr has really grasped correctly the Pauline world view at all. And since this conflict and victory motif is taught in other documents of the New Testament (see above), as Carr himself concedes, it would see that the notion of mighty forces of evil ranged against man was consistently part of the earliest Christian understanding of the world and the gospel.

II. HERMENEUTICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS

⁶⁴ Cf., the recent work of C. H. Sherlock, *The God Who Fights. The War-Tradition in Holy Scripture* (unpublished Th. D. thesis, Australian College of Theology, 1980), which seeks to remedy this deficiency.

⁶⁵ *Angels*, pp. 52–66.

In the previous sketch we have sought to indicate how major exponents since the end of the nineteenth century have understood Paul's references to the powers. Comments and criticisms have been made along the way. The area of study is a limited⁶⁶ though significant one. There is considerable value in examining a narrow theme such as the principalities and powers since it is then possible to focus on significant hermeneutical factors. We now turn to evaluate the important assumptions of these writers as well as the interpretational methods employed by them. **P. 373**

(a) Mythical Language and an Outmoded World-View

Any study of the principalities and powers quickly runs into problems of language, for the apostle Paul as well as other New Testament writers uses terminology that is strange to us. The majority of theologians examined above thus *assume* that such statements about spiritual powers were last vestiges of an antiquated mythology in Pauline thought which needed to be removed by one method or another. Everling in the nineteenth century believed no serious attention ought to be given to it. The older liberal theologians said these mythological elements could be safely eliminated as part of the temporary garb, rather than essence of religion. Dibelius recognized that a world dominated by evil supernatural forces was central to Paul's thinking, but nowadays ideas of spirits and devils have no meaning for us. Bultmann, on the other hand, did not seek to discard the mythological language for this would involve discarding the kerygma itself. He too assumed that mythical thinking was uncritical and necessarily bound up with a primitive or pre-scientific way of looking at the world. But the mythical elements were to be reinterpreted along existential lines.

More recent writers from a variety of theological standpoints (including an evangelical one), presumably embarrassed by the mythical language of the apostle, also speak of demythologizing the powers. Rupp and Stringfellow simply transferred the expression to economic, social and political forces; Wilder, who rejects Bultmann's individualistic and ahistorical approach of existential interpretation, nevertheless claims that the apostle's language and perspective must be 'demythologized' or translated into contemporary terms without forfeiting the evangelical substance.

Berkhof, whose writings have been influential in evangelical circles, argued that Paul himself 'demythologized' the powers, regarding them as structures of earthly existence. His understanding, at this point, was different from that of late Jewish apocalyptic which thought of the powers as heavenly angels. Mouw, writing from a Reformed background, recognized the need to 'demythologize' the principalities, though he does concede that there may be an 'ontological or causal residue' over and above what results from the demythologizing process.

We have already examined the question of myth and the mythological language of the New Testament in the context of Bultmann's existential interpretation. It was noted by some: (i) that myth was not to be understood as part of an outmoded primitive **p. 374** world-view, but characterizes man in any epoch; (ii) that belief about supernatural interventions in the affairs of men is neither mythical, naive nor pre-scientific (as the

⁶⁶ We have avoided the temptation to add names of other writers to the list simply for the sake of completeness, particularly when their treatments and the hermeneutical principles underlying them have already been examined in connection with others. Although various Liberation theologians might have been surveyed, their contributions frequently related to the Exodus motif while their references to the Pauline powers, as far as I was able to discern, were few. The limitations properly imposed on this paper prevented such a wide-ranging assessment.

Enlightenment view would imply); (iii) and that belief in demons is not specifically mythical, as Pannenberg rightly points out.

Further, certain third world theologians have often claimed that a biblical, and especially Pauline, perspective on the powers is perfectly intelligible in their own cultural contexts. The Pauline view of the world does not present a stumbling block to these scholars, and the inference must be that the problem lies with the Western theologians and their cultural conditioning rather than the Pauline language, if it can truly be shown—and we believe it can—on exegetical and biblical theological grounds that his statements reflect a divine view of reality rather than some concession or accommodation to his own milieu which we must then lay aside.

(b) Interpretation of Background as a Hermeneutical Principle

Our investigation into the scholarly study of the Pauline principalities has raised in a particularly acute form the distinct though related hermeneutical issue about the cultural context of or background to the apostle's statements. Pressing questions arise: what were the Jewish and pagan backgrounds to the Pauline teaching? Was Paul influenced by them, or did he modify them? If so, in what ways? And are we committed to such a viewpoint as part of the apostolic teaching? As we have noted Dibelius, Cullmann and Carr gave varying answers to the first question. Furthermore, their particular interpretations of the background to the apostle's thought greatly influenced, even controlled, their exegesis of the Pauline texts. So Cullmann saw a double reference to angelic powers and civil authorities in *exousiai* ('authorities') at [Rom. 13:1](#), because he believed, in part at least, that this was confirmed by the common view early Christianity shared with late Judaism about invisible powers being at work behind the earthly phenomena. The double reference was present, even when not explicitly stated by Paul, since it underlay his thinking. Carr, on the other hand, interprets the background material about the supernatural powers in quite another way—they are good not evil—and so he arrives at quite different conclusions from his study of the Pauline texts. Berkhof's view is different again: Paul took over the language of the powers and the notion that they influence events on earth from his intellectual and religious environment. But the apostle himself 'demythologized' the principalities so that they were structures of [p.375](#) earthly existence rather than heavenly angels or the like. The cynic might be tempted to say that, in some cases at least, the interpreter has read his pre-understanding into the first century background material and from this source into the Pauline teaching itself.

(c) Pre-Understanding and the Text

In the recent hermeneutical debate, particularly since the contribution of Bultmann, the issue of the interpreter's pre-understanding as he approaches the text of the New Testament has been regarded as extremely important. Bultmann is right in arguing there is not neutral or presuppositionless exegesis. There is a constant interaction between subject and object, text and interpreter. But this does not mean there can only be an approximation to the truth of the Word of God in a particular culture or situation.

The interpreter's pre-understanding is not to be regarded as definitive, but nor is he to lay aside his own preliminary understanding, becoming a kind of *tabula rasa* who then indulges in some form of pneumatic exegesis. Instead, he must allow his own presuppositions and pre-understanding to be modified or even completely reshaped by the text itself. An exegesis guided rigidly by pre-understanding will be able to establish only what the interpreter already knows. So there must be constant dialogue between interpreter and text. The hermeneutical circle is not only unavoidable but also desirable.

As the text is given priority so it will interpret the interpreter; the authority of Scripture is taken seriously and God's speaks to me in my situation.⁶⁷

As far as the Pauline teaching on the powers is concerned many expositors, as we have already seen, cannot accept the notion that these principalities are personal, supernatural beings who were defeated by Christ in his death. One way or another writers on this theme representing all shades of theological opinion have sought to evade this conclusion. Now if by careful grammatical and historical exegesis it can be shown that the Pauline language is not speaking of such beings, well and good. But in most cases the arguments have been along other lines, and one wonders whether the pre-understandings are not at best presuppositions which have not adequately been tested, or at worst prejudices.

The same kind of question might be levelled against the complementary notion that the powers are to be identified with the structures of human society, particularly of a political kind. The hermeneutical p. 376 methods employed vary (cf. Käsemann and Mouw)⁶⁸ but the conclusions are the same. It might of course be argued that the general consistency of the final results pointed to the correctness of the conclusions. But another suggestion might be that the destination had already been chosen so that it did not particularly matter which route was taken to reach the common goal!

(d) Interpretation and Biblical Theology

In evaluating the work of Wesley Carr we have already noted that a major weakness of many studies on this Pauline theme has been the limited nature of their investigation. I refer to the wider framework of the holy war tradition in Scripture, from Old Testament to New, within the prophetic tradition and the ministry of Jesus. In short, the Pauline powers are not studied within an integrated biblical theology in which the ultimate purposes of God for his creation are expounded. The victory of Christ over Satan and his minions can properly be understood within those revealed purposes of God, and at the same time the ongoing responsibilities of Christian people *vis-a-vis* the powers can be discerned. Questions as to whether the Christian has any political responsibilities can then be answered in the light of this integrated biblical theology rather than through some slick identification of the powers with political structures. Mouw and to a lesser extent Wilder have indicated an awareness of this need, but neither has developed the point nor effectively checked their own pre-understandings in the light of it.

II. THE MAIN LINES OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE POWERS

A variety of viewpoints about the powers in Paul has been presented in our historical survey. In significant instances these results have reflected differing hermeneutical assumptions and methods. Conscious of some of the hermeneutical pitfalls we propose to look at the main lines of the New Testament teaching on the theme, especially in the light of the dominant view that the principalities are concrete historical, social or psychic structures or institutions. P. 377

(a) Texts in Ephesians and Colossians

⁶⁷ Stanton, in *Interpretation*, p. 68.

⁶⁸ See above.

The three main references in Ephesians to the principalities and powers are chapters [1:20–21](#); [3:10](#) and [6:10ff](#).⁶⁹ 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 heaven-lies’⁷⁰ 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 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,⁷¹ 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 to 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 [p. 378](#) 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.⁷² 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.⁷³ In our judgment this personal interpretation also makes the 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

⁶⁹ The issue of the Pauline or post-Pauline authorship is not particularly relevant to the exegetical issues and need not be examined.

⁷⁰ Note A. T. Lincoln, ‘A Re-Examination of “the Heavens” in Ephesians’, *NTS* 19 (1972–73), pp. 468–483, esp. p. 472.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁷² For a discussion of this crux see my article, ‘Col. 1:20 and the Reconciliation of All Things’, *RTR* 33 (1974) pp. 45–53.

⁷³ For details see E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (ET. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), p. 51.

clutches because they possessed the damning indictment, man's signed 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 had 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 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.⁷⁴ 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 Schweizer⁷⁵ 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 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 as Colossae these *stoicheia* were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man's access to God's presence.⁷⁶ (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 [Gal. 4:3](#) some close connection between, or identification of, these angels and the *stoicheia* is required.)

(b) A Survey of the Wider New Testament Teaching

⁷⁴ A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World* (Kampen: Kok, 1964).

⁷⁵ *Der Brief an die Kolosser* (Zurich: Benziger, 1976) pp. 101f.

⁷⁶ For a survey of the ways this expressions has been understood by Christian interpreters see my *Colossians and Philemon* (Waco, TX.: Word, 1982), pp. 129–132.

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 [p. 380](#) 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', 'Beliar', 'the evil one', 'the accuser', 'the destroyer', 'the adversary' and 'the enemy'.⁷⁷ 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, inter-changeable. One distinction is clearly 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 [Mk. 3:22-30](#); cf. [Lk. 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'.⁷⁸ This is not to suggest that they are always encountered as individuals. Sometimes they are examples of a species (cf. [Mk. 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: [p. 381](#)

(i) Their original creation

In a passage already referred to, [Col. 1:16](#), we noted that all things were created through Christ. The 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 [Col. 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 refers to the reconciling work of Christ, by which 'all things' that have been created are

⁷⁷ For details see H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (ET. Herder: Freiburg, 1961), and R. Yates, 'The Powers of Evil in the New Testament', *EQ* 52 (1980) pp. 97-111.

⁷⁸ Schlier, *Principalities*, p. 18.

now pacified in Christ's death. [Col. 2:15](#) is to be understood along similar lines for the principalities needed to be disarmed and their utter helplessness 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 beast, Jesus faces the Satanic onslaught ([Mk. 1:13](#); [Mt. 4:1-11](#); [Lk. 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 by the finger ([Lk. 11:20](#)) or Spirit of God ([Mt. 12:28](#)), not by the power of Beelzebul, that Jesus exorcises the unclean spirits. He is the one through whom the kingdom of God operates to destroy the power of Satan ([Mk. 3:23-26](#); [Mt. 12:26](#); [Lk. 11:18](#)). He is able to enter the strong man's house and plunder his goods ([Mk. 3:27](#)). Every [p. 382](#) exorcism is a further spoiling of Satan's goods and signifies his defeat. Jesus is also shown as delegating his power over evil spirits to his followers who then exercise it as his representatives ([Mk. 3:14](#); [6:7](#); [Mt. 10:1](#); [Lk. 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 judgement 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.' ([Jn. 12:31-33](#), NIV). The same point about the victory over the evil powers at the cross is brought out in [Col. 2:14, 15](#) (cfr. [1:20](#); [Heb. 2:14, 15](#)), as we have observed above. In Eph., [1:20-23](#); [4:7-11](#) (cf. [1 Pet. 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 [Col. 2:20](#); [3:1ff.](#) make it plain that the Christians at Colosse have died and were raised with Christ out from the sphere of influence of the powers, and ought to live as those free 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 Pt. 5:8](#)). [Eph. 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 [p. 383](#) with human beings but with supernatural intelligences. Our enemies are not human but demonic and 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 Cor. 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,⁷⁹ 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 through the events of history. According to [1 Th. 2:18](#) he hinders Paul (cf. the activity of Satan in the circumstances surrounding Job's life). According to [Rev. 2:10](#) the devil will cast some believers into prison. The inherent distresses of life according to [Rom. 8:38](#) are related to the evil powers mentioned in the same verse, while in the Gospels illness is occasionally due to Satanic or demonic activity (cf. [Mt. 9:32](#) the dumb man; [12:22](#), blindness; [Lk. 9:42](#), epilepsy).

Christian teachers and their teaching are subject to attack and distortion by the principalities and powers. Paul speaks of false apostles who have entered the churches, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 'And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness' ([2 Cor. 11:13–15](#)). And heresy is clearly assigned to their activity. 'The Spirit expressly says that in the last times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to [p. 384](#) seducing spirits and doctrines of demons' ([1 Tim. 4:1](#); cf. [1 Jn. 4:1](#)). According to [Col. 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 Colosse 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 [Rom. 13](#) it is the minister of God, while in [Rev. 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

⁷⁹ Note the treatment by M. Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London: Hodder, 1981), pp. 86ff.

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.

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p. 385

Conversion: To Cosmic Christ?

Sunand Sumithra

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In this article the author explores some of the theological issues in contemporary cosmic Christologies and their implications for conversion. He suggests some emphases needed in a biblical alternative.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Pluralism and the shrinking of the globe are two stubborn but important facts of our time. Inevitably they have created dangerous global tensions. Religion, being the most potent cause of strife in human history, is the main culprit directly or indirectly. What is at stake is the peace and harmony of mankind—nay, its very survival. Under such threats, it is imperative that the unity of mankind somehow becomes the goal of all current human enterprises.

In short, the problem is: How should the traditional concept of Christian conversion be reinterpreted in a situation of the world as a neighbourhood where pluralistic claims of salvation are threatening human survival? Since such issues arise not so much in Church worship or renewal meetings as in the confrontation of the gospel with other religious and secular systems, they are decidedly missiological.

I. CONTEMPORARY COSMIC CHRISTOLOGIES

Though it is difficult to locate the birth of twentieth century cosmic christologies, it is easy to see that the background of the 1960s was conducive to such a birth, particularly the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, 1961, with its theme, 'Jesus Christ—The Light of the World'.¹ Joseph Sittler (then a professor of theology at the

¹ Allan D. Galloway had already used the term for his book *The Cosmic Christ*, New York, 1951.