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The Church and the Powers – A Missions Perspective

by Rev Dr Garth Eichhorn

This paper addresses a key issue for missional churches. It explores the reality of the reaction to the gospel when it is presented in public space. The paper identifies this reaction with reference to the apostle’s term of the Powers as the socially reactive group to the gospel, and then examines the outcomes including the likely outcomes upon the missionary. The paper is about practical theology. It draws upon the writings of recent theologians and makes reference to a New Testament example and the more contemporary mission of chaplains. Good mission should flow from good theology. Mission in a post-Christendom world demands a robust theology which addresses the current society in which we find ourselves as Christians and missionaries. There is every justification for pursuing a practical theology of the Powers. The records of New Testament missionary practice show a substantive theology of the disarming of the Powers as part of the salvation message.

Why Explore the Powers?

With the demise of Christendom churches are becoming more focused on mission strategies that seek to reach and draw in Australians to the gospel. Fifty years ago the churches would run children and youth programs within church facilities, confident these same young people would come to faith and become the future leaders of those churches. Most didn’t! A number of influences have affected Australians and drawn them away (or driven them away) from an interest in the gospel. Some of these influences include:-

- The effects of postmodernism on Australian culture with its incredulity towards meta-narratives such as the gospel.
- Materialism
- Internal church issues such as the misbehavior of the clergy and other church leaders which has been made worse by the media.
- The effects of other major world religions including the effects of immigrants who have come to our shores to establish their faiths.

Many churches are barely surviving and are fearful that their current members will be their last. Stronger churches are venturing outside church space in an effort to win the wider population to the gospel. This paper explores the value and importance of this step and what those in mission may find in the wider, secular, postmodern community. Despite the variety of reactions to the gospel, the paper suggests strongly that the key to the missionary task lies in publicly engaging with the Powers.

The Interface of the Powers and the Mission of Jesus

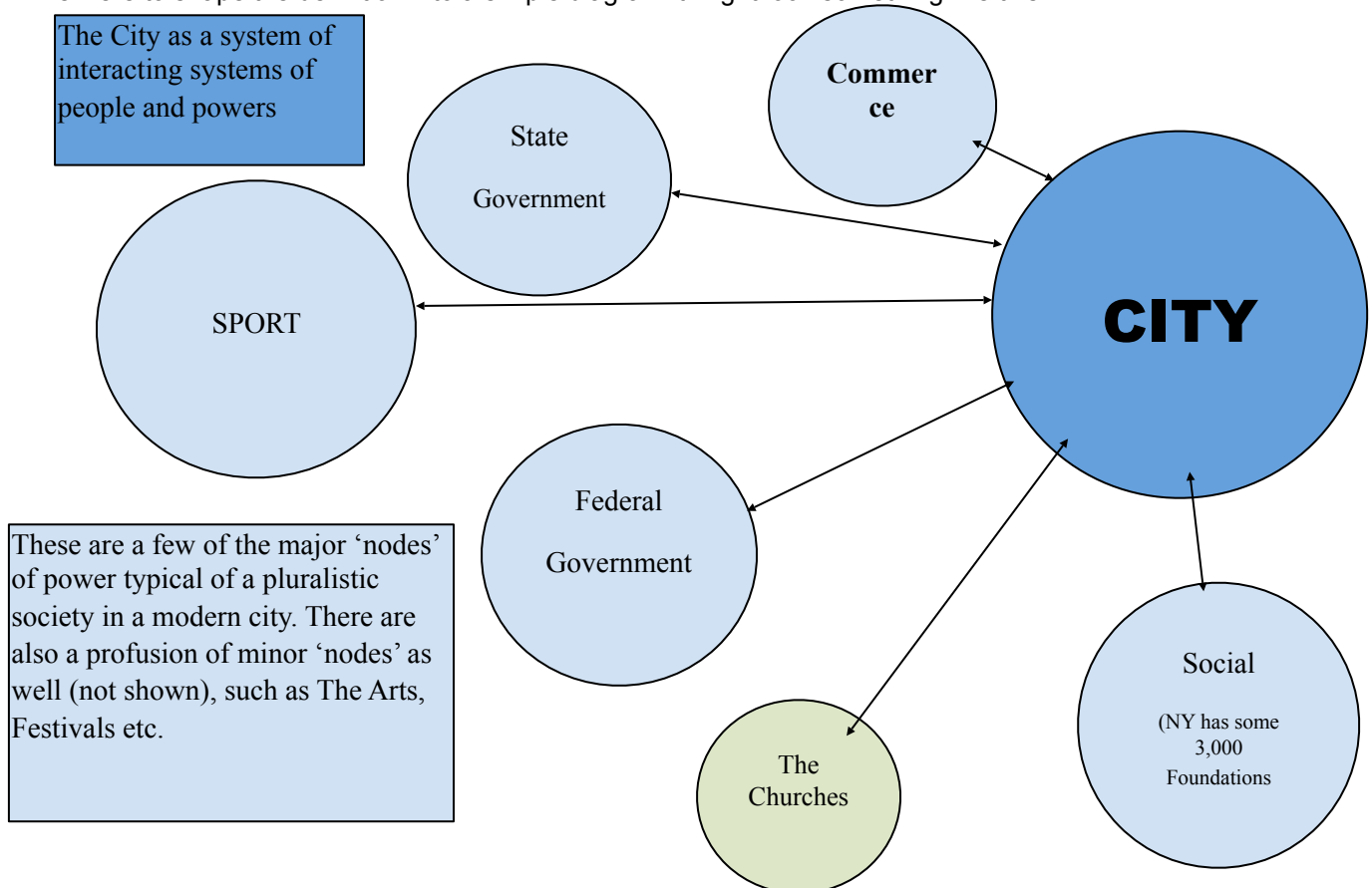
Two questions come immediately to mind with respect to the “Powers”. Firstly, how should we define them? Then secondly, having done so, what is their importance? Evidence will be sought from the pages of the New Testament that show the Powers in relation to God and of their relevance in the missionary task today. And then how the present social situation in Australia offers a pointer to missionary practice of the gospel with respect to the Powers.

Defining the Powers

The excellent work done by theologians such as Hendrik Berkhof, John Howard Yoder and David Bosch will not be reviewed. They have clearly shown that the Church must go further than an emphasis on individual salvation with its focus on justification and reconciliation and the well-being of Christians. The Church must see the wider view of the Christian's role in society as the continuation of the work of Christ.

Despite some widespread confusion amongst Christians today for defining the Powers, Yoder provides a simple and effective definition as a “*network of persons and agencies able to make decisions or exert pressure.*”¹ Wink² earths it a little more into a contemporary setting, “*All of us deal with the Powers That Be. They staff our hospitals, run City Hall, sit around table in corporate boardrooms, collect our taxes, and head our families. But the Powers That Be are more than just the people who run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships. These Powers surround us on every side. They are necessary. They are useful. We could do nothing without them. Who wants to do without timely mail delivery or well-maintained roads? But the Powers are also the source of unmitigated evils.*” Wink’s description goes beyond the simplicity of Yoder and forces us to look inside identifying the social and theological ambivalences within the structure itself. It is these ambivalences which needs attention, especially as they relate to mission. These will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper. One notable absence is a strong reference to the Powers of a specifically personal spiritual type popularly called “demonic possession” or “spirit possession” (of humans). Drawing together these thoughts, a definition might then look something like this: “**The Powers are evident in the spirit of persons and agencies which act for good and bad in society**”.

If we were to shape the definition into a simple diagram it might look something like this ...



A Theology of the Powers

Berkhofⁱⁱⁱ uses the three verbs of Col 2:15 to identify what Christ did to the Powers in the cross and in his resurrection.

1. “he made a public example of them” – Paul implies that Christ was the first to identify the powers and confront them.
2. “triumphed over them” – By His resurrection Christ displayed He is stronger than the “Powers”.
3. “disarmed the rulers and authorities” by unmasking their role.

From his birth the Powers were set against Christ, from Herod’s massacre of the children of Bethlehem to the opposition of religious leaders throughout his ministry years, culminating in His death on a cross. Yet it was in the cross that Christ identified and defeated the Powers. In his death and resurrection, he triumphed over them. The apostle Paul, the preeminent missionary, from his vast experience in mission developed a helpful theology of the Powers. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke showed this tension between the gospel and the Powers. Each missionary episode in Acts identified the Powers and the work of the gospel to disarm them so that the world could see the importance of God’s plan to deal with evil and bring salvation through Jesus Christ.

Of what importance are the Powers to the missionary task?

Current Church Projects and the Powers

Churches in general show a somewhat hesitant and cautious relationship with the Powers and this is evident in a number of ways, such as in

- the preference to use their buildings and their homes for mission (eg Alpha etc); and in doing so limit their contact with the Powers and any repercussions that might result.
- Or in the way churches (Denominational social agencies) work within the social structures of the Powers to provide good outcomes for people (in hospitals, schools and in aged care) thus putting themselves under a contract to work with the Powers rather than maintaining a more objective relationship.
- Or by working within political systems as Christian politicians or in Christian lobby groups with the result that ambivalence is created between the Church and its social doctrines and the wider public social conscience.

All of the above relationships have some missional value and are tried and valuable Christian ministries. But do these modern Christian/secular relationships do justice to the New Testament theology of the Gospel and the Powers? To pursue an answer, it is important to look firstly at a New Testament example.

A New Testament Example of the Mission of Christ and the Powers

Of first importance is a reaffirming of a theology of the Powers and the Gospel as it is given to us in the New Testament. Subsequently consideration must be given to contemporary applications.

The Philippian mission (Acts 16:16-40) provides one such example. In the story of the mission to Philippi there are four obvious expressions of the Powers as they interact with the missionaries of the Gospel.

1. **The slave girl** who is influenced by Powers greater than herself and who acts as their mouthpiece. Luke tells us that Paul was deeply troubled by her words and found them misleading. Witherington^{iv} clarifies the problem of her utterances when he says that the girl’s term “Most High God” ‘*would not suggest monotheism to a pagan, but rather would suggest the deity one saw as being at the top of the pantheon of all gods.*’ It was this deceit concerning the one true God that vexed Paul. Leaving aside the problem of whether the girl

was a charlatan or not, the evidence remains she was seeking to deceive the public about the gospel.

2. **The Slave owners** we are told were making a “*great deal of money*” (v16) from the girl’s fortune-telling. It isn’t clear if they saw the girl as the sole source of their income, but they were upset enough to call in the civil authorities when the source was stopped. This would surely infer that her efforts gave them substantial income and the loss was keenly felt.
3. **The magistrates** provide the third group of players in this story. They gave little thought of justice by supporting their constituents against the foreign missionaries.
4. **The Jailor** was a typical public servant, whom one would expect to have been a toughened jail superintendent quite capable of handling hardened criminals. The combination however, of bruised but singing and joyful prisoners plus an earthquake shakes him to the core of his soul. His inner fears are unmasked and he finds help and salvation with his family in the gospel.

Luke’s story has a sequel with suggestions of the way the gospel dealt with the Powers. If the template of Col 2:15 is used it might look like this ...

- “made an example of them” – ‘they (the magistrates v37, 38) came and apologized’ to the apostles for their political mistake in not enquiring as to their Roman citizenship.
- “triumphed over them” – showing the power of the gospel to release a girl from the tyranny of the Powers and by the conversion of the jailor and his family.
- “disarmed the rulers and authorities” – by breaking through the fears of the jailor and delivering him and his family to salvation!

A range of responses by the Powers

This diversity of responses is important and is often reflected today in missional ministry. Notice ...

- Liberation from the Powers for the slave girl (v18).
- Anger emerging amongst the slave owners (v19-21) with their loss of income.
- The aggressive political expediency of the civil authorities v22, 23) as they backed the traders (slave owners) against the visitors to the city only to come back upon them as they realize their own misuse of Rome’s law.
- The joyful salvation for the jailor and his family (v34).

What These Responses Mean For Missional Ministry Today

There are a number of ways of reflecting on this missionary episode in Philippi and its relation to the Powers. We choose three ...

- A Theological Reflection
- Suggested outcomes for missionary practice and
- Reflections for urban mission practice in the public space today.

Some Theological Reflections

It is sobering to reflect on both the **diversity and depth of the reactions** at Philippi. Those contributing to the reaction included the psychologically disturbed girl, traders in commerce, the judicial principals of the city and a public servant! That is quite a broad response. It was also deep. Freeing the psychologically disturbed is no small task even today and is quite expensive if professional services are engaged! Traders in this case were so angry they petitioned City Hall, bringing about a major public spat. The civil authorities are shown up for their political expediency which lacked a due respect for the accused. The jailor and his family are so touched that he is saved from his own fears and gives hospitality to his two prisoners. A remarkable result for the gospel and from it one can more easily see how Paul could develop his theology of the Powers (ie Colossians 2:15) from the sheer experience of a missionary episode such as this.

There is also the effect on the Powers themselves that must be considered. Wink^v makes a powerful statement to those who would rage (however rightfully) about the suffering that so often arises from evil powers, *“This is the goal: not only to become free from the Powers, but to free the Powers. Jesus came not only to reconcile people to God, but to reconcile the Powers themselves to God (Col 1:20).”* This is an important point. The gospel at work in the marketplace proclaims the gracious invitation of a saving God to bring salvation to the broken lives of those who are in the thrall of the Powers. Some will reject the invitation and see it in opposition to their own power, thus unleashing another shaft of suffering upon the missionary. Others will welcome the invitation bringing healing and hope into their broken and fearful lives.

If this episode of Paul’s is typical of New Testament missionary practice then the Church needs in this post Christendom age to **own this theology afresh**. Berkhof, amongst many encourages Christians to do so, *“All resistance and every attack against the gods of this age will be unfruitful, unless the church herself is resistance and attack, unless she demonstrates in her life and fellowship how men can live freed from the Powers.”* Berkhof^{vi}. This needs pressing even further in the face of the diminishing effect of the Church in Western society today. Paul’s word in Eph 3:10 hands a “baton to the Church” as the only community which can declare God’s wisdom to the Rulers and Authorities. No one else is capable of doing so. Only those freed from the tyranny of the Powers have the capacity. The Church cannot hide from this task and *“is under orders to make known to the Powers, as no other proclaimer can do, the fulfillment of the mysterious purposes of God (Eph 3:10) by means of that Man in whom their rebellion has been broken and the pretensions they have raised have been demolished.”*^{vii}.

Suggested outcomes for missionary practice

There are ever increasing opportunities for Christian mission in a post Christendom era. Of particular importance in western culture is the rise of anti-social behavior. Liberal humanist values may seem appropriate for the general public but offer little personal ability to deal with human weaknesses. To quote a tired senior policeman in Perth recently as he reflected on his work, *“The system doesn’t work”!* There are too many alcohol related incidents, a judiciary with too few tools to deliver justice and politicians whose only resource is to tighten society into even more behavioural laws.

The system certainly doesn’t work and societies everywhere are looking for help. Christians have many opportunities to enter the dysfunctional areas of society offering the hope and healing of the gospel. One such opportunity being taken with school leavers, the health, the military, schools and Aged care sectors is chaplaincy. Unlike other social programs where Christians are contracted into service relationships with the community and thus reducing their overt Christian contribution; chaplains provide a more objective ministry. Their crisis/pastoral care service gives a valuable expression of the gospel in the public space. Chaplaincy of course is but one option of many. Churches alert to their communities will see other opportunities and if wise, will train, encourage and send out their members to meet these opportunities.

Reflections for Urban Mission Practice

From the one example given in this paper of the apostle’s mission practice a number of reflections are apparent.

If we are to take seriously the missionary task for our time in Australian cities, then the Church must pursue “apostolic” ministry as a priority. By “apostolic” we mean working outside of church facilities and working as missionaries amongst the Powers of Australian society. This is a very “Pauline” tradition and one that best serves the post modern society in which we find ourselves.

Closely linked to this priority of apostolic missionary practice in Aussie cities will be the relation of the missionaries to the Powers. Paul’s ministry resulted in the gospel reaching a wide range of the Powers. This suggests a valuable clue to the missionary task today. Australian cities are relatively well organized politically and generally promote a democratic role of their citizens. The diagram on page two of this paper gives a simple view of the many sectors that dominate to a greater or lesser degree in any city. What is significant for the missionary is how the larger issues of society such as law and order are of considerable interest across all these sectors. This results in the emerging of very specific groups which seek to integrate and manage such an issue. No one group can solve law and order

issues. Police in the past have been given the role of maintaining law and order. They can no longer do so. It is increasingly obvious that more and more sectors are being drawn in to help.

Churches need to spend time in their communities to find such issues as the law and order issues. Generally in Australian cities, the starting point is with the community officers in local government. These people have a good view of the local problems and those groups that are cross sectional in developing healing strategies. Christians have the “social capital” so valuable to a society. Their ability to embrace a multicultural society is unique in society today. Ann Morisy, in her useful books on community ministry talks about social capital as “*essentially about trust and the ability and willingness to cross boundaries between strangers*”^{viii} Christians do this well and are so welcome into these cross sectional groups. It will not take long for obvious Christian ministries to emerge once the issues are understood by the churches. Churches need to realize that in every Aussie city will be found committees which serve cross sectional issues such as those mentioned (health or Law & Order). Churches will do well to find them. Experience shows that these committees generally warmly welcome Christians into their midst knowing they have the social capital to help. It is these cross sectional committees which show the key issues that Christians can address with appropriate mission.

The issue of the ambivalences of responses to the gospel must also be addressed within churches. The disarming of the Powers by Christ in Philippi is fascinating and instructive. The variety of responses was not without its suffering for the missionaries. This is such a big issue for Christians, who are human after all and prefer that churches don't get into ministries that might produce suffering for them. It seems to be a middle class values issue mostly. Christians will support and fervently pray for the overseas missionary who is in danger. The degree of danger often provoking a greater response from those at home in the churches! It is very much at the feet of the preachers and pastors to take up this issue with their churches. Bosch rightly talks about the link between mission and suffering as a normal Christian following the Christ of Calvary. “*In a variety of ways Luke portrays Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:40) as a journey to his passion and death... What was true of the Master is also true of his disciples*”^x (p121) Pastors need to preach mission and be an example of the missionary in their community. This will help church members build bridges into their communities with courage.

In Conclusion

Some chaplains, kitted up with their “bomber jackets” clearly marked in big reflective letters “Street Chaplain” were walking across a “T” junction late into the night on a Perth street. As they passed by they noticed a group of men fighting. Drawn to the problem the chaplains were seen by the men fighting and it ceased. The crowd opened up and let the chaplains into the scene. Warm and helpful mediation took place and the crowd dispersed amicably.

Across town one of the female chaplains was approached by a scantily clad girl softly crying. The ensuing conversation provided the chaplain the opportunity to be a mum to a lost girl and point her to freedom from the Powers of the night.

This paper suggests that the missionary stories of the New Testament are valuable templates for missionary practice in a post Christendom Australia. The broad range of Powers at work in our cities can only be identified by Christians. A post modern society is best addressed by a Church committed to an apostolic ministry to these Powers.

- i YODER, John Howard, **The Politics of Jesus**, (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1975), p139
- ii WINK, Walter, **The Powers That Be**, (New York: Random House, 1998), p1
- iii BERKHOF, Hendrik, **Christ and the Powers** – trans J H Yoder, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1977), p38
- iv WITHERINGTON III, Ben, **The Acts of the Apostles – A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary**, (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1998) p495
- v WINK, p199.
- vi BERKHOF, p51.
- vii YODER, p160
- viii MORISY, Ann, **Journeying Out – A New Approach to Christian Mission**, (London: Continuum, 2004), p45
- ix BOSCH, David J, **Transforming Mission – Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission**, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991)p121.