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The Secret of God's Plan

Studies in Ephesians — Study Three

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

Our first study in Ephesians in the present series dealt with the content of God's eternal plan of redemption.¹ The second study was devoted to the implementation of the mystery of God's will.² In this third part we must turn to a consideration of the opposition to what Luther called the "good and gracious will of God."³

A state of conflict "in the heavenlies" was already suggested in the first chapter of Ephesians when we discussed the exaltation of our Lord and were reminded that God had put all things in subjection to Jesus Christ.⁴ The note of a cosmic struggle was struck once more in the apostle's application of two lines from Psalm 68 to our Lord as the great King who had taken captivity captive.⁵ Both of these are rather express references to the opposition. At the same time the central theme of the epistle implies this state of affairs. When it is said that God's good pleasure intends to gather up all things into one great unity under the lordship of Christ, the obvious

implication is that men and other created things have not yet been brought to that point. There is still division and opposition. What is and what ought to be are still in contradiction to each other.

The promise of oneness under the lordship of Christ represents an interpretation of history and reality quite the reverse, let us say, of Mao Tse Tung's cardinal principle that "one shall be two."⁶ In Marxist thought reality comes in units of opposites and history is the story of conflict: Where there appears to be unity of purpose, one must again become two; for it is only out of this dialectical contest that history receives its power to move forward to a moment when, by a leap, society will turn into a paradise of classless and stateless structures of existence.⁷

We can recognize the reference to this "leap" as a caricature of the church's teaching about the end of history. It will take place suddenly, "in the twinkling of an eye," as the apostle puts it in his First Letter to the Corinthians (15:52). The difference is that we as Christians hold to the Biblical view that reality was created to be one, not two, and that it is God's purpose to turn two into one, in Christ and through the church.

This takes a great deal of doing, chiefly because God's design has to reckon with

¹ Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Secret of God's Plan (Studies in Ephesians)," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL (September 1969), 532—44.

² *Ibid.*, XLI (March 1970), 155—64.

³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism, The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 347.

⁴ Eph. 1:22.

⁵ Eph. 4:8.

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⁶ Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Theology of Communism," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXIX (April 1968), 239—45.

⁷ *Ibid.*

opposition of the fiercest kind. This contest is "not with blood and flesh," as the apostle puts it, "but with principalities, with authorities, with the cosmic rulers of this darkness, with the spiritual beings [or forces] of evil in the heavenlies" (Eph. 6:12). The apostle has a few other names for these powers of darkness. Five of them we meet in chapter 1 of Ephesians, namely, "powers," "lordships," "principalities," "authorities," and "names." Another term is found at the beginning of chapter 2, "the ruler of the authority of the air" (2:2), and still another is "devil" (6:11). In Colossians the apostle includes the term "thrones" (1:16) in a series that uses some of the other titles already given. He also employs the names Satan and Belial (2 Cor. 6:15) and does not hesitate to call all these supernatural beings "elemental spirits of the universe" (Col. 2:8) and "the rulers of this age." (1 Cor. 2:8)

The rest of the New Testament uses a few other titles and terms, especially of Satan. He is "the adversary" (1 Peter 5:8), "the accuser" (Rev. 12:10), "the tempter" (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), "the prince of demons" (Matt. 12:24), "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). The Book of Revelation applies to him the mythical ideograms of "the serpent" (20:2) and "the dragon" (20:2). First Peter speaks of him as a "roaring lion." (5:8)

Only in a few cases do these names derive from the Old Testament, where Satan is described as accuser and tempter but is mentioned by name only three times. Demons were also known; but they are not described in the Old Testament as playing any particular role in the redemptive history of Israel. The words we have in the New Testament for these powers of evil

are taken from Judaism, especially from Jewish apocalyptic writing. Judaism, in turn, had taken them over from other religions with which Jewish people had come into contact over a period of time. We might say with Heinrich Schlier that "in some way revelation absorbed them from the tradition of universal experience."⁸

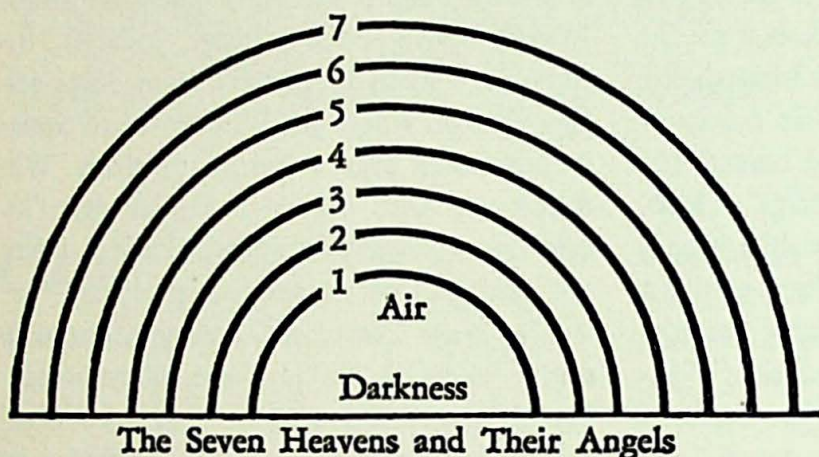
The New Testament, however, is much more reserved about these names than Jewish sources.⁹ It shows no theoretical or speculative interest in them. Nowhere is there an exact description of these phenomena, nor is any attempt made to differentiate them or to rank them according to function and mission. The realm of principalities and powers is of interest to the New Testament because these beings and forces are thought of as standing in opposition to God's eternal purpose. God creates; they destroy. God heals; they afflict. God unites; they divide.

These powers operate in what the apostle calls *ta epourania*, "the heavenlies." Here is a word that occurs only in Ephesians and may relate to the Jewish view of the universe as depicted in the diagram on the next page, taken from Hugo Odeberg's work.

Since "the heavenlies" is an exceptional term, we ought to consider its use. In the opening doxology we read that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ "in the heavenlies." In the statement which names the opposition to God's purpose, contesting forces are described as "spiritual beings of evil in the heavenlies"

⁸ Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961), p. 13.

⁹ See Hugo Odeberg, *The View of the Universe in the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1934).



- 7) Thrones and Authorities
- 6) Angels of Response
- 5) Angels of the Presence
- 4) Holy Ones
- 3) Powers of the Rampart
- 2) Overseers
- 1) Spirits of Dominion

(6:12). As a matter of statistics, the expression occurs five times in Ephesians (1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) and is found nowhere else in the New Testament.

The first two instances are found in passages we have already discussed: 1:3, the opening doxology, and 1:20, where it is said of Christ that He sits exalted above all principalities and powers "in the heav- enlies" (1:20). In 2:6 we are given the surprising assurance that the position of Christ in this respect is also ours in Him. It says: "He raised us together and seated us together *in the heav- enlies* in Christ Jesus. . . ."

In 3:10 St. Paul makes the startling statement that there are principalities and powers "in the heav- enlies" who are learn- ing the purpose of God through the story and work of the church. The last passage says that our struggle is not with "blood and flesh" but with beings "in the heav- enlies." (6:12)

We must observe that both Christ and the evil angels are at work "in the heav- enlies." This fact led J. Armitage Robinson to remark in his great commentary:

The heavenly sphere, then, is the sphere of spiritual activities: that immaterial

region, the 'unseen universe,' which lies behind the world of sense.

In it great forces are at work:

forces which are conceived of as hav- ing an order and constitution of their own; as having in part transgressed against that order, and so having become disordered:

forces which in part are opposed to us and wrestle against us:

forces, again, which take an intelligent interest in the purpose of God with His world, and for which the story of man is an object-lesson in the many-sided wisdom of God:

forces, over all of which, be they evil or be they good, Christ is enthroned, and we in Him.¹⁰

Robinson has said it well except pos- sibly for the abstraction suggested at the outset by the expressions "immaterial re- gion" and "unseen universe." These sound like echoes of a classical rather than a Bib- lical world view. We may get closer to understanding the apostle in contemporary

¹⁰ J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904), p. 21.

terms if we follow Karl Heim and think of "the heavenlies" as "suprapolar space": a kind of space that bounds all other spaces but is not, in return, either limited or bounded by them.¹¹ It would be a kind of fifth dimension.

This is not to suggest that in his day Paul would have understood an expression like "suprapolar space." His terminology, quite possibly, is related somewhat to the Jewish view of the seven heavens, as suggested in the diagram. In 2 Corinthians the apostle specifically refers to having been snatched up to the third heaven (12:2), which he there identifies as Paradise (12:4). In such a view of the heavens the word "air" is used of the region just above "the darkness." This is useful to gain some insight into Paul's reference to Satan as "the ruler of the power [realm] of the air" (Eph. 2:2). It suggests that evil forces are at work in our total environment and yet are not bound by our limitations of space. The apostle assures us nevertheless that Christ defeated them in His resurrection.

In Jewish speculations, as the diagram suggests, various orders of angels were assigned to these seven heavens, beginning at the top with "thrones and authorities." Below them are the "angels of response," who bring replies to the "angels of God's presence," who rank third. Then come the "holy ones," below whom are the "powers of the ramparts or hosts." Just below these are the "overseers." Way down at the bottom, belonging to the region of the "curtain," are the "spirits of dominion." We have already noted that the New Testament shows no interest in this kind of

speculative ranking or naming. The use of many names suggests, however, that the subject is not adequately described by any one name. We are basically dealing with a single phenomenon, but it is diffused and confronts us in various manifestations. These powers represent a collective principle and are capable of purposeful activity—specifically, to oppose "the mystery of His will."

It is against this kind of background that we must understand the apostle's call to arms in chapter 6:10-20. He did not intend to depict a heroic individual standing in the splendor of his own strength. On the contrary, the passage is an exhortation for members of the Christian community to join the battle against God's opposition with the proper weapons for the right war. The pericope reads as follows:

For what is left (finally), find your strength in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the complete armor of God for you to be able to stand up against the devices of the devil. Because our fight is not with blood and flesh, but with principalities, with authorities, with the world rulers of this darkness, with spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies. For this reason take up the armor that God provides, so that you may be able to stand your ground on the evil day to complete your work and still stand.

Stand, then, buckle on the belt of truth with righteousness as your coat of mail and your feet wearing the preparation of the Gospel of peace. With all that take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one. Accept salvation as a helmet and the Word of God as the sword of the Spirit. Pray every moment in the Spirit with prayer and intercession. And to this end keep watch with perseverance

¹¹ Karl Heim, *Christian Faith and Natural Science* (New York: Harper, 1953).

and entreaty on behalf of all the saints, including me: that as I open my mouth a message may be given me boldly to make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I serve as an ambassador in chains; that I may speak boldly in it as it is my duty to speak. (6:10-20)

The issue of this conflict, of course, is not in doubt; and the evil powers know it.¹² Hence they act more vigorously and attack more ferociously as time goes on and the moment of their final defeat approaches. For this kind of contest only divine armor will do. The way to victory is clear; it needs to be consummated as the divine Warrior goes forth "conquering to conquer."

In the ruins of ancient Ephesus there are several low pillars which presumably depict the various items that belonged to the uniform of a Roman soldier.¹³ It has been suggested that Paul may have had these in mind as a way of writing to the Ephesians in terms that would be familiar to them and of which they would be reminded as they walked along the particular street where these figures still stand. Since, however, the apostle omits two essential items in a Roman soldier's equipment (the spear and the greaves, or shinguards), it is more probable that he has in mind the divine Warrior of the Old Testament as He

¹² According to Matt. 8:20, the evil spirits in the man called "Legion" complain that Jesus had come "ahead of time" to torture them.

¹³ J. Keil, *Ephesos, Ein Führer durch die Ruinenstätte und ihre Geschichte*, 3d ed. (Vienna, 1955). At one place Joachim Jeremias suggests that this "imagery of the celestial panoply" establishes a point of contact with Qumran (see "Qumran and Theology," *Interest*, III/3 [1969], 8). Such a connection is unlikely, however, since Qumran proposed to equip whole military units.

is described by more than one ancient prophet. There is one passage in particular which deserves to be quoted in this context. It describes a very evil day, indeed, on which God's Warrior stands forth to do battle.

Justice is turned back
and righteousness stands afar off;
for truth has fallen in public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking, and he who departs from
evil makes himself a prey.
The LORD saw it, and it displeased Him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no
one to intervene.
Then His own arm brought Him victory
and His righteousness upheld Him.
He put on righteousness as a breastplate
and the helmet of salvation upon His
head.
He put on garments of vengeance for
clothing
and wrapped Himself in fury as a
mantle. (Is. 59:14-17)

If it is this picture to which the apostle alludes, he does not hesitate to identify the member of the church with God's Warrior of old, arming him with the very panoply of God for the same kind of conflict, where justice, truth, peace, faith, and salvation are at stake. It is a bruising contest, calling not only for a defense against what are called "the flaming arrows of the evil one" but also for aggressive action with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." (Eph. 6:16-17)

Likening speech to a sword is a frequent practice in the Old Testament. The passage which is immediately in the apostle's mind is probably Is. 11:4: "He shall smite the earth *with the word* of His mouth,

and with the Spirit through His lips shall He slay the wicked."

The Word of God, as uttered by the prophets, is described as an instrument of vengeance. From such thoughts, however, Paul rapidly passes to the mention of prayer and proclamation as effective combat weapons in this conflict with evil. He asks his readers to stay alert in prayer and intercession and to include in their petitions the special entreaty that he, the apostle, be given boldness for the proclamation of the mystery of the Gospel.

In our day of noisy and endless chatter we at times depreciate words. At the moment it is fashionable to exalt nonverbal ways of setting forth the Gospel and to denigrate the use of language as a means of proclamation. But the Scriptures never let us forget that words can be swords. It was a voice, with words of repentance, that prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. It was His own words about the Kingdom that began a movement into which we have been caught up and whose end we know because God's eternal purpose at work in our midst has been made manifest by the apostolic word.

Happily some very exciting studies have been made of this strange gift of language with which men have been endowed.¹⁴ In fact the whole discussion known as the "new hermeneutic" revolves around the issue of words and speech.¹⁵ Perhaps we shall soon learn to appreciate again this gift and the privilege of verbalizing the

¹⁴ Aarne Siirala, *The Voice of Illness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

¹⁵ James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr., eds. *The New Hermeneutic*, Vol. II in *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

Gospel. Possibly the Lord Himself will raise up once again among men His "voice" to bring us a new sense of direction and a feeling of excitement that great things are under way.

At any rate, the apostle asked his readers to pray that he might be given from God a word of boldness. We know the consequences. We know that his language was strong enough to turn the world upside down! We are familiar with his accents; they ring in our ears from the letters he wrote as part of his involvement in the contest with principalities, powers, lordships, angels, authorities, and — you name it! (Eph. 1:21)

Now we must see how the apostle's words apply to our age. In using words that apply to cosmic phenomena the apostle intended to call the attention of his readers to the existence of a rift "in the heavenlies." He uses other terms to speak of the basic rift in history between Jew and Gentile. He also touches on the rift that runs through each human heart, where the practice of the vices listed in 5:3-4 is the manifestation of these evil powers in our individual experience: immorality, greed, coarse and ribald talk, the language of people who want attention, whose chief concern is the satisfaction of self!

To combat these evils, God's eternal design calls for us to be incorporated by Baptism into the risen Christ, where the conditions of our existence are exposed for what they really are. The struggle against the principalities is always a movement from faith. And so the battle cannot be waged except in a struggle with oneself, for there is a fifth column within us. The ally of the principalities within me is my false love of self and my turning away from

God and from my neighbor in injustice and self-righteousness.

When a man gives way to anger, he makes room within himself for the devil. Hence St. Paul says: "Let not the sun go down upon your anger. Give not place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26). If we are to resist this evil and drive out the devil, we can wage this struggle by denying ourselves and choosing to abide in truth, justice, peace, and hope. This is not simple moralism. The apostle intended to indicate the actual place of sin in life as a power which disrupts and destroys. The struggle is hard precisely because it is a fight against sin. One weapon is particularly effective, namely, sacrifice. In every little sacrifice by which we yield to the justice and truth manifested in Christ we imitate Him in bringing to God a sweet-smelling odor (see Eph. 5:2). Against such sacrifices the enemy is powerless. He has no foothold for his own self-willed intent and ambition.

But we must move beyond this level of thinking only in terms of the individual's experience with his own personal temptations. When Paul talked about "powers," he was thinking of them as supramundane realities that condition earthly life as structures within our history. This is not to say that he did not conceive of them in personal terms. He did; yet that is not where his accent is to be found, as we discover from Galatians (4:9), where he was ready to speak of the Torah as such an "elemental spirit of the universe." The law given at Mount Sinai tended, among men, to be absolutized, to come between men and God, and hence to become disruptive. It had been given to men to provide a full life: doing justice, loving mercy,

and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Instead its very possession made men arrogant, separating them from "lesser breeds without the law" and so negating the unity that God had in mind for His creatures.

Such "powers" wear two faces, as is clear from the way in which Torah became a "power" that divided men and separated them from God. On the one hand, they serve as "the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinings of creation."¹⁶ On the other hand, however, by holding the world together, they hold it away from God.

Paul does not think of these "powers" merely in terms of evil. In fact, at least some of them—like the Law (religion), time, space, politics, sex, authority, public opinion, philosophy—keep life from degenerating into chaos. They are dikes, so to speak, with which God encircles His good creation. These fixed points, to which theologians refer as "orders of creation or preservation," are not the devil's invention. Evil can never create anything; but it can pervert these "powers" so that they tyrannize men and distort all of life by their determination to become absolutes. Their weapon is the power of illusion, which is their ability to persuade men that they themselves belong to the ultimates of existence.

Let us examine a few in the order given by Albert van den Heuvel under the heading "The Two-Faced Powers of Our Day."¹⁷ The first is the complexity of our

¹⁶ H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. from the Dutch by John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1962), p. 22.

¹⁷ Albert van den Heuvel, *These Rebellious Powers* (New York: Friendship Press, 1966), pp. 56 ff.

situation resulting from differentiation and specialization. On the one hand, these forces have provided the opportunity of liberation from the prison of village community life, where local mores forge the shackles of slander and mutual observation to keep men from widening their horizons. On the other hand, as the report of the World Council of Churches' Conference on Rapid Social Change (1959) has pointed out: "Men must pay a price for the revolutions involved . . . the price is seen in 'lostness,' loneliness, frustration and disillusionment. . . ." ¹⁸

Take another case. As Harvey Cox has shown, secularization can be and has been a blessing for both the church and the world.¹⁹ For the church it has proved wholesome because it sets theology free from a function that was not intended for it in the first place. Theology's business is to make the Gospel understandable. Doctrine was not at all meant to produce a structure of domination that would rob individuals of their responsibility to think and explore. Yet such secularization can easily become the "power" called "secularism," which is a philosophy that requires men to give up living in encounter with God by making a dogma out of the historical process of secularization. And if the result of secularization is that the church cannot serve the whole world any longer, then secularization has become an absolute, an independent power that requires the worship and submission of people. At that point another "power" goes into revolt against its Creator.

We proudly speak of our age as the

¹⁸ Quoted by van den Heuvel, p. 59.

¹⁹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965).

"atomic age." For the first time in human history man has named an epoch of existence after the provision of a force of nature. This can only be regarded as the subjection of mankind to the claims of the powers of the elements, which not only provide endless benedictions but have also created the terror that haunts the nations.²⁰

There exists a "power" we might refer to as community spirit. As a servant it looks like a force that will enable us to live together. But it wears another face, "conformity," which can quickly turn team spirit into a master, a god.²¹

An obvious example of the two-faced nature of the powers is *sex*. It was created to serve man. "From the delight of Adam over Eve, to the ecstasy of the man and the woman rejoicing over each other in the Song of Songs, to art of modern times, man has known that no lovelier power than sex was given to serve him."²² Yet this very same power can utterly pervert and destroy men and women — putting them at enmity with each other and in rebellion against their Creator.

At this juncture we need to return to our basic theme. The purpose of the mystery of God's will is to redeem men from these powers, lordships, and authorities. What does that mean in the light of the eternal purpose discussed on the basis of Ephesians?

It signifies, in the first place, that in the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord the powers were unmasked and disarmed.

²⁰ Schlier, p. 56, footnote 54.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, 3d ed. (Pfullinger: Verlag Günther Neske, 1957), pp. 199 ff., for a philosophical analysis of this phenomenon.

²² van den Heuvel, p. 69.

They are now limited in their influence, because the revelation of God's will in Jesus Christ helps us to recognize such structures of domination as distortions of the responsibility of dominion with which men were endowed when they were created in the image of God. We can see what it means when love turns into lust, how this strikes at the very heart of God's grand design for men.

The very existence of the church is a strong factor in the work of delimiting "principalities and powers." Its presence in any culture puts a question mark over against society. In our culture, too, some men and women see through the deception of the "powers" with the help of God's revelation of His secret plan. As a result, they raise their voices when race is set up as an absolute, dividing man from man. They exercise the church's prophetic office when they point out the evils of all ideologies and "isms."

Moreover, since Christ's crucifixion, the "powers" can no longer attain their goal. In spite of themselves they have been made subject to Him in whom all things are being brought together under one head. When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive and took His place at the right hand of God "far above all principalities and powers." The opposing "lordships" may, of course, try to banish from our midst the memory of Christ and the signs of His authority. When that begins to take place, we are called upon to prevent it by our proclamation of salvation.

In principle, our victory over "the powers" has been won in Christ. Already the shadow of the great "Halt!" at the end of time falls over them.²³ Our presence as members of God's people in a world ruled by "powers" is an aggressive fact. We bear the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. In this way we serve as instruments for the agent of reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ, under whose lordship all things are even now being gathered up.

After this bit of reconnaissance we know the enemy better. We note that even in his rebellion the work of subjection to our Lord Jesus Christ is clearly written across his destiny. In the meantime we have taken a look at the weapons put at our disposal. Above all, we have been reminded of the victory that has already been achieved for us and which we have the privilege of proclaiming and living.

Crown Him the Lord of Heaven,
 Enthroned in worlds above,
 Crown Him the King to whom is given
 The wondrous name of Love.
 Crown Him with many crowns
 As thrones before Him fall;
 Crown Him, ye kings, with many crowns
 For He is King of all.²⁴

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²³ Gordon Rupp, *Principalities and Powers* (London: Epworth, 1964), p. 15.

²⁴ Matthew Bridges, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), Hymn 341, stanza 5.