

Powers of Evil

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In his excellent commentary on Ephesians, John Stott defined the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:21, 3:10, 6:12) as angels and demons. I respectfully disagree.

Paul heaps up nouns to identify God's enemies: rule and authority?power and dominion?every name that can be invoked?cosmic powers over this present darkness?spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. He names too many types of power to have meant just Satan, demons, and angels.

Don't get me wrong. Paul certainly recognizes Satan as the highest enemy of Jesus and his Church. Satan is called "the ruler of the kingdom of the air who is now at work in those who are disobedient." (Eph. 2:2). We are instructed to "not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:27), to "take our stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph. 6:10), and to "extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Eph.6:16). But there are other forces of power affecting human life that are spiritual in nature but not necessarily demonic.

Supernatural powers and their earthly expressions dominate human life. Paul writes from a Roman prison, awaiting execution. The Roman Empire is surely a spiritual force of evil, and not just a political and economic force. The strength of Rome and its idolatrous claim of "Lord and Savior" for its emperor presses down upon the young church. The pressure to buckle and submit to Rome's system is intense. And so Paul writes "be strong" and "stand firm" (Eph. 6:10,11, 13, 14). He knows the Ephesians are sorely tempted to shrink back from proclaiming the gospel, and so he prays for them (Eph. 1:17-19, 3:14-19) and asks them to pray for him to declare the gospel fearlessly (Eph. 6:20).

It was crucial that the church in Ephesus had the eyes of faith to see Jesus enthroned with his enemies at his feet. Knowing that truth enabled them to keep gathering for worship, proclaim the gospel, and care for the needy in Jesus name regardless of Rome's response.

Corrupt governments, economic practices of discrimination, consulates that control visas? all of these have spiritual power behind them. But that power can be changed and influenced through the prayers and witness of the Church. Jesus has converted emperors and toppled systems like apartheid. God's purposes in the world cannot be thwarted.