



Powers and Authorities: Preaching Romans 8:35–39

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INTRODUCTION

In his piece entitled “Our Father,” the Russian composer Alexander Gretchaninoff ornaments the Lord’s Prayer with verses from all over the Bible: Among others, he makes use of the chant of the seraphs in Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of thy glory” (Isa 6:3), Psalm 23: “By still waters their path shall be” (Ps 23:2), and the prophet Malachi: “And upon them that fear thy name, showers of blessings unnumbered shall fall” (Mal 4:2).¹ In his treatment of the doxology at the end of the prayer, he draws on the language of the letters of Paul in order to explicate the line “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.” The choir proclaims, “Sing then of mercy, of judgment, of kingdoms, of thrones, dominions and power for evermore.”² The first two terms are not diffi-

¹ Alexander Gretchaninoff, “Our Father,” in *Music of Eastern and Central Europe*, dir. Robert Gurney, choir: San Francisco Lyric Chorus, First Unitarian Universalist Church, San Francisco, April 27, 2013.

² Gretchaninoff, “Our Father.”

A tendency in modern Christianity is to reduce the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to moral and ethical teaching. Yet Paul understands that the Christian is faced by powers beyond their control, and that it is God alone who will protect. The Christian preacher does not diminish these powers but reminds hearers of the power of God to overcome all other powers.

cult to understand; themes of mercy and judgment occupy many biblical texts and therefore many sermons. We have a vocabulary to discuss them and to preach on them. Perhaps, “kingdoms” wouldn’t have presented any difficulties either, if it had stood alone. While not all would view the term through the lens of Luther’s theology of God’s two kingdoms, the majority of people would understand *kingdom* as an old-fashioned word for a political realm.

Then the question occurs: Why use four words for the same thing? Even granting poetic license on the composer’s part, we know that Gretchaninoff drew on the Bible for his words, and in the text of Paul’s letters, the same repetition occurs. This repetition forces us to ponder: What differentiates a kingdom from a throne or a dominion or a power? On a base level, what is a kingdom, a throne, a dominion, or a power? Beginning to answer these questions requires digging into the letters of Paul. Even though defining each of them specifically is a task beyond this investigation, this article argues that exploration of Paul’s terminology opens up new avenues for preaching the gospel in the United States in the twenty-first century.

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The closest match to Gretchaninoff’s work comes in Col 1:16: “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers,” but, for our purposes, I believe that Rom 8:31–39 presents a better workshop for exploring Paul’s terminology. This section, sometimes labeled as Paul’s “Hymn to God’s Love,” presents a similar list to that of Col 1:16. It begins with a series of rhetorical questions. At the end of the series, elaborating on the question, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul sandwiches a quote from Psalm 42 in-between two lists of things that will not separate us from Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35–39). The first list consists of “hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword” (Rom 8:35). The second consists of “death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height depth, and anything else in creation” (Rom 8:38–39). The inclusion of “powers,” in the second list connects us to the matter at hand. Having established the point of departure, I proceed in this article to highlight the ways that Paul’s terminology actually involves us in matters of cosmic proportion and that modern conceptions have removed the teeth from his proclamation. Then, enlisting help from the Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén, I show how trends in American Christianity obscure Paul’s focus. Finally, I point to the new perspective that a first-century worldview provides for our preaching of Rom 8:35–39.

THE STRUCTURE OF ROMANS 8:35–39

At issue in reading Romans 8:35–39 is the question of why Paul has divided these terms into two lists. Is he piling up terms for different kinds of suffering, or do the lists have different organizing principles? The organizing principle of the first list emerges without much interpretative wrangling. Paul has listed problems that plagued the community in Rome, which modern Christians across the world still continue to suffer from. Paul organizes the first seven terms around the present; they are sufferings in this world and this life. In the words of the Gospel of Matthew, they are the thorns into which the wheat fell, the cares of the world that choke the word (Matt 13:7, 22). It is important to note that the cares that Paul enumerates do not all arise out of persecution by rulers. Many of the terms (*hardship, distress, peril*) are generalizations, and “famine” is a problem that overshadows worldly kingdoms. By bringing generalizations together with the environmental and with outright persecution, Paul draws a totality of present sufferings that cannot separate us from the love of Christ. Having drawn the totality of suffering together, Paul makes the point that Christian suffering falls under the umbrella of suffering for God, writing “For your sake we are being killed all the day long” (Ps 42:22). With the quotation, Paul thrusts his readers into the role of sheep waiting for the slaughterhouse. This use of Psalm 42 and his understanding of all suffering as suffering for the sake of God provides one of the keys to understanding the link between the lists on either side of the quote. However, before turning to this link, a thorough examination of the terms of the second link is in order.

The relationship of the items in the second list is less clear than in the first. While Paul includes generalizations as in the first list: “things present,” “things to come,” here he also tends toward the abstract: “death,” “life,” “height,” “depth.” There also seems to be a third category involving people and things: “angels” and “rulers.” And where exactly does the term that interests us, *powers*, fit into the list? I believe the key to the organizing principle of the list lies in the very last term, *τις κτίσις ἑτέρα*. The NRSV chooses to translate abstractly (“anything else”) and with a prepositional phrase (“in creation”), but the phrase could just as easily be read concretely: “any other created thing” or perhaps even better “anyone else who is created.” If we read the last term as a capstone referring to all the others in the list, our categorizations break down; every other term in the list is another created being. Death, life, angels, rulers, powers, heights, and depths acquire personality, and with the acquisition of personality, Paul’s list starts to depart from our twenty-first-century conceptions. In order to see just how far it departs, we must turn to the greater context.

POWERS AND AUTHORITIES IN THE (TWENTY)-FIRST CENTURY

As remarked above, the rulers and the powers in Rom 8:35–39 occupy the same sphere as a number of related terms: thrones, dominions, authorities, and principalities. Even with concerted study, scholars agree that the distinction between the

terms eludes us.³ However, the idea that binds the terms together proves less elusive, and in exploring it, we will move from the earth into the heavens. On a basic level, Paul's notion of powers refers to the earthly authorities that constitute government and have some responsibility for law and order.⁴ This basic use occurs in the oft-debated passage in Romans 13, wherein Paul commands the Romans to obey the "authorities." Within the twenty-first-century US context, it is tempting to interpret all of Paul's terminology in light of this passage. Under this interpretation, Paul's discourse is directed primarily against political entities and the structures that undergird them. Walter Wink's Powers Trilogy reads Paul in this fashion, utilizing Paul's letters as a tool for attacking structural injustice.

Wink's reading comes out of the school of New Testament thought known as "demythologizing," a school committed to reinterpreting first-century concepts into concepts the authors think modern minds can understand. The father of demythologizing interpretation, Rudolf Bultmann, can point us in the direction of Paul's original intent. Bultmann reminds us that for the New Testament, "the earth is more than the scene of natural everyday events. . . . It is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his daemons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that men think and will and do."⁵ Within the framework of a world populated by invisible spirits, the cohesion of Paul's terminology starts to emerge. Paul's proclamation to his readers that Christ leads the powers captive (Eph 4:8), his reprimand against returning to the elemental spirits of the world (Gal 4:9), and his foretelling of Christ's destruction of all "power, dominions, and authority" preach Jesus Christ's victory in this supernatural struggle (1 Cor 15:24).

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This realization is useful on a broad interpretative level, one aspect of which occupies the next section. More specifically for our purposes, it unlocks the distinction between Paul's two lists in Rom 8:35–39. As noted above, in the first list, Paul assures his readers that earthly suffering cannot separate them from the love of Christ. Then, in the second list, he assures his readers that no creature has power over them when it comes to the love of Christ. More specifically, Paul assures his readers with regard to creatures of a demonic bent. While terms like angel or

³ O. Cullman, "Authorities," in *A Companion to the Bible*, ed. J. J. Von Allmen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 28.

⁴ J. Y. Campbell, "Authority," in *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 26.

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth by Rudolf Bultmann & Five Critics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 1.

ruler may seem positive or at the very least neutral in twenty-first-century usage, Paul's terminology harkens back to imagery from the book of Daniel and the apocryphal book of Jubilees. In Daniel, rulers are not neutral but hostile to God's chosen people (Daniel 7). In Jubilees, the angels are not helpful but are in revolt against God (Jubilees 5). This backdrop births a different manner of preaching Rom 8:35–39, rescuing the passage from sentimentality and engaging it with the very nature of Christ's saving death.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

In order to understand the connection of Rom 8:35–39 with the doctrine of justification, some assistance is in order from Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén. In a study entitled *Christus Victor*, Aulén pointed out the fact that in the early church and in Martin Luther, a central theme was “the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering.”⁶ Building on the early church's emphasis on Christ's victory, he notes a curious bit of exegesis. Building on the imagery of Psalm 110 and Psalm 2, the early church maintained that though Christ had conquered death in his resurrection and had ascended to the right hand of the Father, his ultimate victory had not yet occurred. Though Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, and though he has broken the power of his enemies, he will not completely do away with them until he comes again in glory. In the in-between time, the evil powers of this world thrash like dying animals and continue to attack humanity.

Aulén contrasted this view of Christ's saving work with the substitutionary model and the exemplary model. In the former, the emphasis is on the way that Christ's death pays the debt of sin to God. In the latter, the life and death of Christ serves as an example for Christians to follow out of their sinful lives.⁷ The purpose of this article is not to argue for any of the three as the “correct” view; readers interested in the question ought to pick up Aulén's book for themselves. However, before returning to Rom 8:35–39, it is important to consider the ways in which the dominant trends of American Christianity obscure the emphasis that Aulén discovered in the early church and Martin Luther.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

In considering the larger context of American Christianity, two trends emerge that militate against the *Christus Victor* theme: one, American Christianity carries with it a strong ethical current. Two, the notion of born-again Christianity colors much of the discussion. These two trends cut across the political divides

⁶ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 4.

⁷ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 2–3.

within American Christianity. Though I am painting in broad strokes, and, of course, exceptions exist, these two trends drive American Christianity toward the exemplary and the substitutionary models of atonement. Not only that, but they often narrow the focus of American Christianity onto worldly concerns, a focus that further obscures Paul's supernatural emphases.

On the one hand, the connection between the ethical current in American Christianity and the exemplary model of substitution flows clearly. Christ, through his teaching and through his example, laid out the road that Christians ought to walk through the world. The crucifixion functions as the example par excellence of love; to quote the Gospel of John, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Beginning with the Massachusetts Bay Colony and strengthened by the arrival of the rigors of Methodism, the ideal of creating a society molded by Christian love has continued to this day. Within this emphasis, a continuum exists. Some, as exemplified by the rise of the Moral Majority in the middle of the twentieth century, have cast Christ's example primarily in terms of individual obedience to his commandments. Others, for instance the Social Gospel of the late nineteenth century or the social justice movement of the early twenty-first, have emphasized the responsibility of Christians to undo societal injustices. Though they differ on what obedience looks like on a practical level, the two sides agree that following the example and commands of Christ constitutes the Christian life. This emphasis is profoundly practical, and as such, while it can take into account Paul's warnings against earthly rulers and political structures, it has no time to worry about the supernatural. The emphasis falls on the responsibility of the individual to act in the here and now.

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On the other hand, the connection between the born-again current and the substitutionary model may not be as clear or seem as broad. The strand connecting the two is temporal; each operates on a "then-now" time sequence. In the case of the substitutionary model, Christ's death on the cross pays the debt owed to God on account of sin. Unlike in the *Christus Victor* model, in which Christ sits at the right hand of the father until his enemies are placed under his feet, there is not a delay in fulfillment. Before the cross, the debt remained unpaid, after the cross Christ has paid it once and for all. The once-and-for-all nature of the atonement leads directly to born-again Christianity. Before accepting Jesus, the Christian was a hopeless sinner. Having accepted Christ, the Christian is free to live a life worthy of him. The "then-now" formulation binds American born-again Christianity together with American Christianity's ethical focus. Further, this "then-now"

formula is not restricted to Christians who claim born-again status. In fact, it undergirds the ethical formulations of Social Gospel and social justice emphases. To take my own denomination as an example, the ELCA motto, “God’s work, our hands,” carries with it the notion that having been freed by Christ, we can participate in God’s work in the world. Though not articulated in born-again language, the underlying idea is the same: Christ has done the work, and now we must get to work. The ethical focus and the practical nature of this tendency precludes recognizing Paul’s supernatural and cosmic concerns.

PREACHING ROM 8:35–39

Having looked at Rom 8:35–39 in the context of Paul’s first-century worldview, the *Christus Victor* model of atonement, and the dominant trends in American Christianity, a new emphasis for preaching the text presents itself. In the following section, I highlight the ways that this emphasis expands the impact of this text in one particular instance: preaching at a funeral.

In my experience as preacher and congregant, I have most often encountered Rom 8:35–39 in the context of funeral preaching. Paul’s proclamation that death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus has provided comfort to many who grieve. Without diminishing any emphasis on Christ’s love, returning to Paul’s conception of demonic beings and Christ’s triumph over them gives this text a flexibility to meet the horrors of the twenty-first century world.

The preacher who acknowledges the power of the demonic beings in the world is a preacher who realizes that they cannot simply spend their time telling their congregants how to live their lives. By acknowledging that the demonic interferes in our lives and our decisions, a preacher acknowledges that their congregation is fighting against more than just bad decision making.

In a world that calls pastors to preach in the face of suicide and overdose and childhood cancer just as much as in the face of death from old age, the demonic demands our attention. The unintended consequence of an emphasis on ethical responsibility and sin as action has allowed biology to creep its way into our pastoral care. Cancers, chemical dependencies, and self-harm get sorted under the umbrella of the body not functioning properly. But anyone who has sat by the hospital bed of a dying child or with a family in the aftermath of overdose can sense that something greater and more evil is at work. Calling a spade a spade and confronting the demons that afflict humanity allow us to proclaim that humans do not always control their own actions, that self-harm is not a moral failing, and that death of a child is not natural. By revealing their demonic nature, we can proclaim

that all these things are blights upon creation, and we can point to that day when Christ our Lord will at last undo them all. In preaching where we acknowledge that we live caught between God and the devil, we put away notions of burying suicides outside the graveyard, both figuratively and literally. It will take courage to preach against the demons, both the courage to acknowledge that we as humanity are not in control and the courage to preach in the face of a worldview that reduces everything to the physical and the observable. But in doing so, we unlock a hope that extends beyond preaching at a funeral.

The impact of understanding the way that Paul pairs together worldly sufferings and demonic beings in Romans 8:35–39 extends beyond preaching on the subject of death. By confronting the demons in the life of our congregation, we come up against the limits of the American Christian emphasis on ethics and proper living. The preacher who acknowledges the power of the demonic beings in the world is a preacher who realizes that they cannot simply spend their time telling their congregants how to live their lives. By acknowledging that the demonic interferes in our lives and our decisions, a preacher acknowledges that their congregation is fighting against more than just bad decision making. In turn, the preacher who recognizes the ongoing battle is a preacher who knows that they need to continually point their flock to Christ's victory over the demonic and to Christ's final triumph. In pointing forward to Christ's final triumph, that preacher can teach their congregation to wait, because the congregation that can wait in perseverance and in prayer is the congregation that is best equipped to fight in the spiritual ring. ⊕

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