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Spiritual Powers in Paul's Writings: An Adequate View for Mission in Melanesia

Marilyn Rowsome

[It appears that some of the bibliography was missing from the original text. Some authors' names are cited in the text, but there are no corresponding references in the bibliography. For information of readers, those authors' names are now shown in the bibliography, together with reference details that could be reliably determined. However, the remaining works, to which the citations refer, are not known. Furthermore, a number of the page numbers shown against author citations in the text are incorrect. Unfortunately, the correct page numbers could not be determined. –Revising ed.]

Introduction: The Issue

“If you want to understand the Melanesian mind, you must think spirits everywhere, and in everything.” This was the advice of my national coworkers as I sought to teach and apply the truth of God's Word, in a relevant way, to my Melanesian students. This statement does not mean that Melanesians continually intellectualise about spirit beings, for it is not so much a matter of the intellect, but of the “liver”, the life experience of the individual. It speaks of the immanence of the spirits, and their involvement in the total life of the Melanesian community. “People, brought up in traditional Melanesian societies, look at happenings, and see in them the working of spiritual forces, which fill their environment.”¹

Now, according to my Western worldview, there are not spirits everywhere, and in everything. And so I ask myself, “What is the correct thinking – the Melanesian, or the Western, view?” This question is a real issue in my thinking as a cross-cultural communicator. It can only be answered in the light of the biblical view of the spiritual world. So, in this essay, I will investigate biblical teaching on the spiritual powers. Because there is so much material, I will concentrate on the data on principles and powers, as found in Paul's New Testament writings (Part I). From this follows the formulation of a biblical theology of these powers (Part II). I will then review the current thinking about the powers, suggesting an interpretation, which is both adequate for today, and true to biblical teaching (Part III). I will then discuss the implications of this teaching to the task of mission in

¹ Joseph A. Taruna, “God's Power Exceeds Melanesian Power”, BTh thesis, Banz PNG: CLTC 1980, p. 1.

Melanesia today (Part IV). After such an investigation, in the conclusion, I will be able to give a more adequate answer to the question I have already raised regarding the correct thinking about spiritual powers in Melanesia today.

Part 1: The Biblical Data

On reading the Bible, with my eyes open to this question, I see that God's Word never forgets the fact of evil, and the real strength of the evil powers. From Gen 3 to Rev 21, the Bible outlines a battle between the Supreme Power, God, and His enemies, lesser spiritual powers, working in numerous ways. The New Testament uses a large number of terms to describe the powers of evil – principalities, powers, rulers, dominions, thrones, princes of this world, lords, gods, angels, demons, unclean spirits, elemental spirits, Satan, the tempter, the evil one, destroyer, adversary, accuser, and so on – showing how much the Christians of the early church were concerned with the unseen world. Because of the extent of this data in the New Testament, I will confine myself to the writings of Paul.

(i) The Pauline Material

Paul's worldview included the concept of an invisible world of both good and evil spirits.

He speaks of angels – spiritual beings in the service of God (Rom 8:38, 1 Cor 4:9; 6:3; 11:10; Gal 3:9; Col 2:18; 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Tim 3:16; 5:21). But there are also evil angels – demons, who, in particular, are the power behind idolatry (1 Cor 10:19-21). He predicts that, in the last times, these deceitful spirits and demons will become increasingly active to turn men away from the truth (1 Tim 4:1-3). Paul assumes the existence of an evil spirit – the archenemy of God, called the devil, or Satan. He is the ruler of the authority of the air (Eph 2:2), the god of this age, who blinds the minds of men to the truth, to turn believers away from the gospel (1 Thess 3:5), to hinder God's work (1 Thess 2:18), to raise up false apostles (2 Cor 11:14), and to attack the workers of God (2 Cor 12:7). In all this, Paul is sure that Satan's doom is fixed, God will crush him under the feet of the saints (Rom 16:20).²

(ii) The Terms used for Spiritual Powers

Paul refers only to good and bad angels, to Satan, and to demons, but he uses another group of words to designate supernatural powers. The following list will show the extent of Paul's use of these words, and their meanings.

² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974, p. 401.

GREEK WORD	BIBLE VERSES	ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS
archēs ἀρχῆς	1 Cor 15:24 Eph 1:21 Col 2:10	rule, principality, prince
archas ἀρχάς	Rom 8:38 Col 1:16; 2:15 Eph 3:10; 6:12 Tit 3:1	principalities, authorities, dominions clearly government leaders
archontōn ἀρχόντων	1 Cor 2:6, 8	rulers, princes
daimoniōis δαιμονίους	1 Cor 10:20, 21 1 Tim 4:1	devils, demons
dunamin δύναμιν	1 Cor 15:24 Eph 1:21	power, might, strength
dunameis δυνάμεις	Rom 8:38	powers
exousian ἐξουσίαν	1 Cor 15:24 Eph 1:21; 2:2 Col 1:13; 2:15	authority, power, dominion, rule, tyranny
thronoi θρόνοι	Col 1:16	thrones, potentates
kosmokratoras κοσμοκράτορας	Eph 6:12	world rulers, sovereigns, despotisms, cosmic powers, worldly princes
kuriotētos κυριότητος	Eph 1:21	lordship, dominion
kuriotētes κυριότητες	Col 1:16	authorities, potentates
ochurōmata ὄχυρωμάτα	2 Cor 10:4	strongholds
pneumatika tēs ponērias πνευματικά τῆς πονηρίας	Eph 6:12	spiritual hosts of wickedness, spirits of wickedness, spirit forces of evil
pneumasin planois πνεύμασιν πλάνοις	1 Tim 4:1	deceitful spirits, seducing spirits
stoicheia tou kosmou στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου	Col 2:8, 20 Gal 4:3, 9	rudiments of the world, first principles of the world, worldly principles, men's thoughts and ideas, elemental spirits of the world, world's crude notions
epouraniōn kai epigeiōn kai katachthoniōn ἐπουράνιων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων	Phil 2:10	all who dwell in heaven, in earth, and under the earth, beings in heaven, earth and underground

These words can be summed up in such collective concepts as:

- cosmic powers and authorities;
- principalities and powers;
- the spirit world, with all its kings and kingdoms, rulers, and authorities;
- spiritual and supernatural powers of the air.

In this essay, I will use the term “spiritual powers”, or simply “powers”, to denote all that Paul speaks of in these references.

(iii) The Meaning of These Terms

Usually these powers are considered evil, and opposing the kingdom of God. But some of these verses speak of created beings existing for God’s glory (Col 1:16), with the Christ as their head (Eph 1:21, Col 2:10). To these powers, the manifold wisdom of God will be made known through the church (Eph 3:10). And yet other verses definitely speak about powers opposed to God (Eph 6:12; Col 2:14). I would like to suggest that, by these terms, Paul refers to *all* supernatural beings. There are principalities and powers, which surround God’s throne, and act as His agents and emissaries, just as there are principalities and powers surrounding, and working for, Satan. In this essay, I will be dealing mainly with the latter, the evil spiritual powers.

Some writers try to separate the terms Paul uses, finding distinct meanings for each one. Lloyd-Jones says, “ ‘principlality’ carries the notion of inherent power. The word ‘power’ suggests, rather, the expression, the manifestation of that power.”³ Mrs Penn-Lewis, commenting on Eph 6:12, limits “principalities” to forces dealing with nations and governments, whereas “powers” have a wider sphere of influence in all realms of life.⁴ Some writers try to construct a hierarchy, based on these terms, but the variety of ways in which Paul uses the words warns us against this. According to Ladd, “A study of the language Paul uses to designate these angelic spirits suggests that Paul deliberately employed a vague and varied terminology. This is seen, particularly, in his alternation between the singular and the plural forms of several of the words. It is impossible to successfully group this terminology into clearly-defined orders of angelic beings, nor is it at all clear that, by the various words, Paul purposes to designate different kinds or ranks of angels. Probably, Paul was facing views that elaborated distinct

³ David M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Warfare*, London UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, p. 58.

⁴ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *War on the Saints*, abridged, Fort Washington PA: CLC, 1973, p. 12.

orders of angels, and he purposed, by his exceedingly flexible language, which may almost be called symbolic, to assert that all evil powers, whatever they may be, whether personal or impersonal, have been brought into subordination by the death and exaltation of Christ, and will eventually be destroyed through His messianic reign”.⁵

This is, in fact, the thrust of Paul’s writing. He has no doubt about the reality of the spirit world. But “he supplies us with no biography of the devil, and no account of the origin of the forces of darkness. His purpose is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to warn us of their hostility, and teach us how to overcome them.”⁶

“The idea of sinister world powers, and their subjugation by Christ, is built into the very fabric of Paul’s thought, some mention of them being found in every epistle except Philemon.”⁷ And yet, Paul has no crippling fear of the spiritual powers (as Melanesians do). Rather, at the heart of Paul’s teaching, is the absolute assurance of the victory of Jesus Christ, the great conqueror of Satan and his workers.

(iv) The Source of Paul’s Thinking

The ancient world was demon-ridden, to a degree, which we find difficult to comprehend. Leon Morris says, “men of antiquity, in general, had no doubts that the universe was peopled with a host of spirits, some good, and some evil. The spirits exercised influences beneficial, and baleful, on the lives of men.”⁸

In Greek thinking, every spring, grove, mountain, tree, stream, pool, rock, as well as the wind, lightning, and storms had its demon. For the Jew, the שְׂדֵימָוֹן (*shēdīm*) (Hebrew for evil spirits) haunted empty houses, lurked in the crumbs on the floor, in oil, in vessels, or in drinking water, filled the air in the room day and night. So, Jewish apocalyptic writing, popular Judaism, Hellenism, and pagan gnosticism, all had much to say about spiritual powers. In particular, pseudepigraphal writings of intertestamental Judaism spoke of intermediate beings between God and man, some belonging to God, others to Satan. They ruled over the realm between heaven and earth, so influencing human existence. Evil powers were capable of bringing man into bondage, by causing harm and sickness.

⁵ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 402

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1979, p. 261.

⁷ G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: a Study in Pauline Theology*, Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1956, p. 8.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1976, p. 202.

Paul takes up these terms, already used, without much explanation, suggesting that his readers were thoroughly familiar with the usage of such words. But the new meaning he gives is in relation to their rightful place in the universe under Christ, and the possibility of release from the influence of such powers, because of the freedom to be found in Christ.

Paul's knowledge of spiritual powers was not just head knowledge, learned in his academic training. He had personal experience with such powers in his own ministry. On Paphos, he encountered the sorcerer, Bar-Jesus, who opposed the work of God (Acts 13:6-13). In Philippi, he was tormented by a fortune teller possessed by an evil spirit (Acts 16: 16-18). At Ephesus, he drove out evil spirits from the sick (Acts 19:12), and witnessed a public burning of many books used in magical practices (Acts 19:19). In each case, in the name and power of Jesus, Paul confronted the powers, showing the supremacy of the Lord Jesus, and the victory to be found in union with Him.

From this background and general survey, I would now like to turn to a more detailed study of Paul's teaching on spiritual powers.

Part II: A Theology of Spiritual Powers

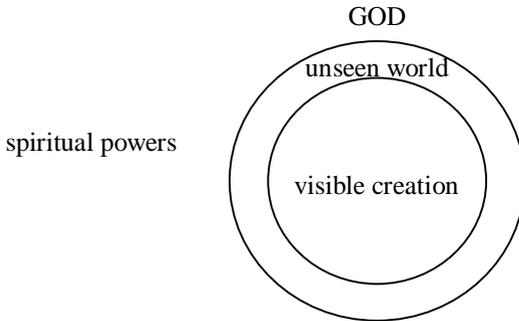
By interpreting and systematising the biblical data on spiritual powers in Paul's writings, a theology of powers emerges. I will describe this teaching, by referring to six stages in the developing drama of the powers.

- (i) their original creation;
- (ii) their subsequent fall;
- (iii) their decisive conquest by Christ;
- (iv) their learning through the church;
- (v) their continual hostility;
- (vi) their final destruction.

(i) Their Original Creation

The powers are linked with creation in Col 1:16. For Paul, the creation encompasses things in heaven as well as on earth, things invisible, as well as visible, for creation includes thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities – that is, the total complement of spiritual powers, both good and evil. All were created by Christ, and for Him.

What was the purpose of the spirit world in God's perfect creation? On this, Paul is silent, but I would like to speculate on this point for a moment. If all the spiritual powers were created good, then, it is to be assumed that they fulfilled a positive function in God's creation. Glasser suggests that the invisible world formed a link between God and the visible creation, such that the powers were channels of God's love to man.



The powers held life together, giving cohesion, by the formation of forms, traditions, ethics, morality, and justice – all essential elements for societal existence. Berkhof calls the powers dykes, which provide the framework of creation, preserving it from disintegration, by holding society together and, preventing the chaotic deluge from submerging the world.

If the powers are, in fact, rudimentary principles, essential to human society, could this be what Paul is referring to, when he uses the word *στοιχεῖα* (*stoicheia* = elements) in Gal 4:3, 9; and Col 2:8, 20? Does he mean the essential elements of life, that is, the spiritual powers, which, in their original creation, provided the fundamental links of the universe to preserve the society? Many different interpretations have been given to the concept of *στοιχεῖα* (*stoicheia*). In this essay, I can only give a brief summary of the usage of this word, in an attempt to throw light on what Paul meant.

στοιχεῖα (*stoicheia*) literally means objects, which stand in a row, or form a series. The alphabet is an example. So, the word was used for the basic principles, the ABC, or rudimentary teachings, of any subject (as in Heb 5:12).

The Jews used the word to refer to the basic teachings of the law. Paul knew that such teachings could enslave a person, when rituals, taboos, and formal worship became the reality, rather than Christ (Col 2:8, 16, 20-23). He was afraid

that the Galatians would lose their newfound liberty in Christ by submitting again to such slavish legalism (Gal 4:3, 9).

The Romans and Greeks used *στοιχεῖα* (*stoicheia*) to speak about spirits, which indwell the elements, or basic things, of the universe, like air, water, wind, fire, moon, and stars. These ruling spirits acted as intermediaries between God and man, so controlling different things, and places, in the world. Paul states that these spiritual powers are really not gods, for, when compared with Christ, they are weak and pitiful (Gal 4:8-9). Once liberated from these powers, it would be foolish to put oneself under bondage to them again.⁹

Whatever Paul referred to by this word, *στοιχεῖα* (*stoicheia*), the thrust of these passages is that the *στοιχεῖα* (*stoicheia*) need not dominate anyone, as they have done in the past, because, in Christ, there is true liberty.

Every spiritual power was created by Christ. He is Lord of all. Whatever the role of the powers was, in the original creation, it is very clear that they do not fulfil this role in the world today. We now turn to the reason for this.

(ii) Their Subsequent Fall

We can only assume the fall of some of the powers, because of the role they play today, and the need of Christ to conquer them. Paul is silent on what actually happened in the heavenly realm, although, in 1 Tim 3:6, he does hint at a proud rebellion led by Satan. This rebellion has meant that part of the angelic world has become hostile to the divine purpose. God's sovereign will has, somehow, permitted Satan and his workers to exercise a large area of power, over the course of this age. The rebellious state of the world is reflected, not only in the fallen condition of mankind, but also in the rebellious state of a portion of the angelic world, the wicked spiritual forces in this evil age.

The powers play a new role in this world, for they seek to dominate man, bringing him into bondage to their rule. This is not their correct place, for Christ is Lord of all (Col 1:16). They occupy this place by convincing men that they are the true reality. It is an exercise of power, by allusion, through their lies and deceit (1 Tim 4:1), so much so that, today in Melanesia, beliefs about the spirits rule the people's lives. The powers are, in fact, usurpers, taking a place in God's creation,

⁹ John M. Hitchen, *Only faith brings freedom: Paul's letter to the Galatians*, Christchurch NZ: Syndoulos Publishers, 1986, p. 62.

to which they have no right. Man without Christ is subject to all the perils that the spiritual world can mount. The spirits are antagonists whom no man can tame. The plight of man, in bondage to them, is indeed a sorry one!

(iii) Their Decisive Conquest by Christ

Here, in fact, is the major thrust of Paul's teaching on powers. Whenever Paul mentions spiritual powers, it is with the implication that Christ is supreme over them. Christ has won the victory, through His death and resurrection. Christ has broken their counterfeit authority, and exposed them to be what they really are. In His death, He did something to the powers to break their hold, to uncover their deception, so that no longer are they able to pose as regents: tyrants, dominating over human beings. In Christ, they are shown to be powerless to separate us from God's love (Rom 8:38). The cross was the scene of a public exposure, and a resounding triumph by Christ.

This is the meaning of Col 2:15, where Paul says that Christ disarmed the principalities and powers, making a public spectacle of them, and triumphing over them by the cross. The word translated "disarmed" is ἀπεκδυσάμενος (*apekdusamenos*), a passive participle meaning "to strip off". J. A. T. Robinson says that Christ, in His death, stripped off His flesh, through which the powers of evil and death were able to attack men.¹⁰ Moule says that Christ stripped off the powers of evil that had clung to His humanity.¹¹ Both of these understand the verb to be a true middle voice. MacGregor sees the use of the middle voice "to strip off from Himself" as significant. "Christ took upon Himself the physical constitution of man; God had sent Him 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' – 'flesh', in which the principalities and powers still could make a lodgment. And, in the act of dying, He divested Himself of that flesh, and, with it, stripped off the principalities and powers, thus breaking their dominion, and carrying with Himself, in His victory, all those, who through faith, had come to be in Him, and, thus, shared this experience."¹²

Bruce follows the RSV translation, which takes the middle verb as having an active meaning. Christ has disarmed the spiritual powers, stripping them of their

¹⁰ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 435.

¹¹ H. C. G. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon Studies*, London UK: Pickering & Inglis, 1957, pp. 101-102.

¹² G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers", in *New Testament Studies* i (1954-1955), p. 23.

insignia of rank, or their arms.¹³ By His death, Christ triumphed over His spiritual enemies, winning a divine triumph over the cosmic powers.¹⁴

A note on 1 Cor 2:6, 8 is here necessary, for some exegetes see, in these verses, the idea that the principalities and powers, themselves, brought Christ to the cross, doing this in ignorance, because they did not recognise who He was.¹⁵ They take ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος (*archontōn tou aiōnos*), translated “the rulers of this age”, to be a term for spiritual powers. The more natural meaning of ἀρχόντων (*archontōn*), in this context, is political rulers, such as Pilate and Herod. (Compare the use of ἐξουσία (exousiais) in Tit 3:1 and Rom 12:1-2 to clearly mean “political rulers”). If this is so, then these verses in 1 Cor 3 add nothing to Paul’s thought of Christ’s victory over the spiritual powers.

Thus far, we have seen that Christ is superior to all the spiritual powers, as Creator, because of His lordship, and, as Redeemer, because by His death, resurrection, and ascension, He triumphed over Satan, sin, and every conceivable force of evil. Christ crucified, and risen, is Lord of all, enthroned supreme above all, as head over every power and authority (Eph 1:21; Col 2:10).

(iv) Their Learning Through the Church

It is in the church that the Lordship of Christ is fully realised. So the presence of a new, redeemed community in the world is a visible sign that reconciliation to God through Christ means freedom from anything, which may bring bondage. As the church displays this freedom, it announces to the powers the many-sided wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

Stott says, “as the gospel spreads throughout the world, it is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and the church members of every land are the actors. God Himself has written the play, and He directs, and produces it. The cosmic intelligences in the heavenly places are spectators of the drama of salvation.”¹⁶

¹³ E. K. Simpson, and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957, p. 240.

¹⁴ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 435.

¹⁵ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, London UK: Adam & Charles Black, 1968, p. 72.

¹⁶ Stott, *God’s New Society* p. 123.

This verse has been interpreted differently. Caird sees that God's purpose is to use the church to inform and redeem the powers, that is the politico-economic structures of human society.¹⁷ I do not think that principalities and powers can be limited to earthly structures (see Part III), or that the activity of the church, referred to here, is redemptive as well as informative.

If the church is to have this proclamatory role to the powers, then it must, by its very life, display its freedom, by allowing the Spirit of God to set it free from fear, or anything else, which the powers might use to bring bondage to individuals, or to the community of God's people.

(v) **Their Continual Hostility**

The passages that we have looked at so far suggest that the powers are already subjugated to Christ, having been deprived of their power and influence. But, Eph 6:12 speaks about the Christian wrestling with supernatural evil powers, a conflict, which is going on in the present. 1 Cor 15:24 suggests that there is a time coming, when every power shall be defeated, and shall submit to Christ. This paradox of the powers already defeated, and yet not defeated, the powers already subjugated, and yet then to be subjugated, is expressed and held by Paul, especially in the book of Ephesians.

The Christian is caught in the middle of this tension that, on the cross, the powers were disarmed, and yet Satan is not yet destroyed, as he will be, when he is cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). His final defeat will be accomplished at the return of Christ. The whole interim period between the Lord's two comings is to be characterised by conflict. The peace, which God has made, through Christ's cross, is to be experienced for those in the midst of a relentless struggle against evil. And, for this, the strength of the Lord and the whole armour of God are indispensable.¹⁸ Note the defensive nature of the armour, with which Christians are provided. We are not to attack Satan and his workers, but, rather, we are to stand free in the victory that Christ has already won. We are to hold the powers at a distance, by staying close to Jesus, drawing upon His power, might, and strength (Eph 6:10).

God's kingdom means the divine conquest of His enemies, a conquest, which, according to Ladd, is accomplished in three stages. With the death and

¹⁷ Caird, *Principalities and Powers*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁸ Stott, *God's New Society* pp. 262-263.

resurrection of Christ the victory was begun. Christ curtailed the power of the evil forces. "The power of the kingdom of God has invaded this present evil age, so that men now may know the rule of God in their lives."¹⁹ The very fact that we can be delivered from the power of Satan speaks of his defeat. Satan and his workers have been thrust down from their pinnacle of power.

The final two stages in the conquest occur when Christ returns. The first of these is at the beginning of the millennium, when the evil powers are bound in the abyss (Rev 20:3). The last stage is after the millennial reign Christ, when the last enemy, death, is destroyed, and Satan and his evil forces are thrown into the lake of fire.²⁰ Ladd concludes, "to the human eye, the world appears little changed. The kingdom of Satan is unshaken. Yet the kingdom of God has come among men, and those who will receive it will be prepared to enter into the kingdom of glory, when Christ comes to finish the good work He has already begun. This is the gospel of the kingdom."²¹

And so, the Christian in this world finds himself in a conflict against the hostile spiritual powers. And yet, it is a conflict, of which the outcome is already assured. Two illustrations may help to clarify this tension.

- (a) In a military battle, the outcome of the war is decided by the leaders, at a point in time, but then follows the long, slow, mopping-up operations. The death and resurrection of Christ was the clear turning point in this spiritual battle. The outcome has been decided, and yet the conflict continues, until Christ returns.
- (b) A ferocious dog terrifies everyone by its bark, and yet, on closer inspection, the seemingly dangerous dog is found to have its teeth removed, and so, is really powerless. Knowing this changes one's whole attitude to the dog. Likewise, the powers have exalted themselves, magnifying their authority, so as to tyrannise far beyond their reality.

Each illustration shows that the disarming of the powers, a fact of the past, was the first stage in the victory. The Christian lives in this present evil age (Gal 1:4) until the destruction of the last enemy, death, the final operation in the victory

¹⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, London UK: Paternoster Press, 1959, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51

(1 Cor 15:26). How then are we to live in the interim? As free men, liberated from the continuing power of evil, living under, and declaring, Christ's supremacy in every situation in life. This is the essence of the Christian life.

(vi) Their Destruction – The Final Restoration

The goal of God's redemptive purpose is the restoration of order to a universe that has been disturbed by evil and sin. This means a total cosmic reconciliation, involving mankind (2 Cor 5:19), the spiritual world (Eph 1:10), and nature (Rom 8:19-23). All things will be reconciled to God through Christ (Col 1:20). There is to be a restoration of all things to their rightful place and purpose in creation, as Jesus is acknowledged as Lord by every creature on earth, and in heaven, and under the earth (Phil 2:10-11).

In the final consummation, the total cosmos will be delivered from the curse of evil. So, what is to become of Satan and his kingdom? Shall the evil spiritual powers again function in the right way, or shall they be removed, or destroyed? Paul does not answer all our questions here, but he does make plain that every alien authority and power will be overcome. One of the purposes of the mission of Christ is to destroy every rule and authority and power, for He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. When He has done this, He will deliver the kingdom of God to the Father (1 Cor 15:24-25). We have already said that Paul imagined Christ as beginning this kingly rule at His ascension.

We need to go to other scriptures to help us answer the question of the future of the spiritual powers. Jesus, Himself, speaks forcefully of the eternal destruction of the wicked (Matt 25:31-46). Peter and Jude speak of the coming judgment of the fallen angels (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). Revelation tells us that Satan and his followers will suffer eternal judgment (20:10; 21:8), and that nothing impure will enter the New Jerusalem (21:27). A theme of Psalms is that God, the King, will conquer and destroy all His enemies. And so, our understanding of God's cosmic plan of reconciliation must be consistent with such scriptures, even if we cannot fully understand how this is possible.²²

Some interpreters have seen the language of reconciliation as meaning "a universal home-calling", salvation for all creatures, human, and angelic. Origen says that the fallen angels benefit from the reconciliation. Glasser believes that the powers will, once again, fulfil their divinely-appointed function in God's creation.

²² H. A. Snyder, *Community of the King*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1978, p. 49.

But a word of caution is needed here. Universal acknowledgment of Christ's Lordship does not mean universal salvation. Many will bow before Christ's rule unwillingly. There is no clear statement in scripture that Satan, his spiritual workers, or his human followers, will be reconciled to God in the last day. Rather, it is clear that their end is the lake of fire and eternal punishment. It seems to me that cosmic reconciliation is only possible with the removal of Satan and the evil spiritual powers.

Even though Paul does not answer our specific questions on this, he is certain that this eschatological reconciliation will be accomplished through the blood of the cross (Col 1:20). The death of Christ means triumph over evil spiritual powers (Col 2:14-15), and the final consummation is but the effective extension of the victory won on the cross.

Summary

This, then, is Paul's teaching on spiritual powers, and especially those evil powers, which work against God and His kingdom. In all Paul's references to principalities and powers, he has an ethical and not a theoretical point to make. We have a new life in union with Christ, and, living this new life, makes the powers obsolete, for they have no opportunity to do their work of destruction, or to bring us into bondage.

Part III: Current Interpretations

Traditionally, it has been assumed that Paul, in his teaching on spiritual powers, was speaking of personal demonic intelligences, the unseen spiritual powers of this evil age. But, in post-war times, other interpretations have become fashionable. It is thought that Paul was referring to structures of thought (tradition, convention, law, authority, religion), especially, as embodied in the state, and its institutions.

Gordon Rupp says, "down the centuries, the principalities and powers have assumed many disguises. Terrifyingly deadly, they are sometimes sprawling across the earth in some gigantic despotism, at times, narrowed down to one single impulse in the mind of one individual man. But the fight is on. For believers, fighting there is the certainty of struggle to the end. But there is also the assurance of victory."²³ In saying this, Rupp transfers the expression "principalities and powers" to economic, social, and political forces. Hendrik Berkhof equates the

²³ Stott, 1979, p. 268

powers with human traditions, religious and ethical rules, which were created by God, but have become tyrannical, and, themselves, objects of worship. In Christ, these powers are “Christianised”, or “neutralised”, as they return to their God-appointed roles.²⁴ Markus Barth says, “by principalities and powers, Paul means the world of axioms and principles of politics and religion, of economics and society, of morals and biology, of history and culture”.²⁵

Each of these scholars has made Paul’s references to spiritual powers speak relevantly to our own earthly structures. This interpretation reflects modern thinking, which rejects belief in angels and demons as archaic. At the same time, it draws on an unhealthy preoccupation with world structures, such that “principalities and powers become structures in disguise”.²⁶ It is true that the vocabulary of spiritual powers is used of political authorities in Rom 12:1-3 and Tit 3:1. In other contexts, however, Paul stresses the supernatural nature of these powers, by using the term “in the heavenlies”, meaning the unseen world of spiritual reality (Eph 1:20; 3:10; 6:12). This is particularly clear in Eph 6:12, when Paul says that the Christian’s warfare is “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark age, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”, traditionally understood as “not with human, but with demonic, forces”.

Spiritual powers can, in fact, use earthly structures for good or evil. The powers may become incarnate in concrete forms, such as, culture, political structures, the state, economic systems, materialism, affluence, traditions, laws, legalism, public opinion, philosophy, nationalism, sexuality, permissiveness – in fact, they can take hold of anything for their own purposes. In themselves, these things are not evil, but they can become tools of the supernatural powers, in order to enslave man to things that have no true authority. The power of the godless Hitlerite regime is a classic example. John Stott warns us against identifying the powers only as human structures. In doing this, we limit demonic activity to these structures, and tend to class all human structures as evil, denying the possibility of good in society.²⁷

We must acknowledge the reality of personal spiritual powers, and discern the means they use, or “the clothes they wear” to accomplish their evil purposes in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 270.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 271.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 274.

the society in which we live. This is, in fact, an important task of any cross-cultural worker – to recognise the tools, which the powers use to bring bondage, both in his own culture, and the culture in which he works. And so, we now turn to the implications that an adequate theology of the powers has on the missionary task today.

Part IV: Implications for Mission

Any biblical theology of mission must consider seriously Paul's teaching on spiritual powers. Our theology of powers will affect the way we view the missionary task today.

Obviously, we need a good balance in our own thinking about powers. C. S. Lewis warns "that there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They, themselves, are equally pleased with both errors."²⁸

With this warning, I would like to suggest four areas of mission, which will be significantly affected by our theology of spiritual powers.

(i) Our Motive for Mission

The world is held under the bondage of Satan and his workers. People, outside of Christ, are blinded to the truth of God's word by evil powers, who have exalted themselves to a position of authority, in order to snatch away the glory and honour due to God. Satan is a liar, a deceiver, and a trickster, who uses every spiritual power available to him to bring mankind into slavery to himself, so cutting man off from knowing the love of God. Knowing this, every Christian, who has already been released from this bondage, should want to share the good news of victory in Jesus Christ with those still bound, so that they, too, can be released, in order to be what God created them to be.

Surely, this is one reason why people cross cultural barriers with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Melanesians, today, are held in fear by the tricks of Satan. Ancestral spirits are believed to determine the destiny of the living. Fear and bondage result. I believe that this is Satan and his workers masquerading as dead ancestors, in order to bring people into slavery, through fear, and the rigid observance of taboos. The missionary task is to announce to the world the tricks of

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, London UK: Collins, 1942, p. 9.

the evil powers, to unmask them for what they are, and to liberate people, so that they can enjoy fellowship with God, worshipping and serving Him with their total lives. Everyone today, at some time, feels in the grip of forces that are stronger than themselves. Paul had a message for such people. We, too, have the same message for every person in every society today. It is a message of liberation and freedom, obtained only through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Creator and Redeemer of the world. Let us declare the message everywhere.

(ii) Our Strategy for Mission

As we go with this task, our theology of the powers tells us that we are in a battle. We have an enemy, whose desire it is to oppose the work of God, and keep people in bondage. The devil fears, and hates, the gospel, for it is God's power to rescue people from this tyranny (Rom 1:16). We must be aware of the forces, against which we wrestle, know their strategies (2 Cor 2:11), and stand against them. God provides His workers with armour for the battle. It is our responsibility to take it up, put it on, and use it confidently against the powers of evil. We do this in total dependence on Christ, knowing that, in Him, we are more than conquerors, because He has already won the victory. We dare not launch into mission with any other attitude.

(iii) Our Approach to Traditional Spirit Beliefs

A mission comes to a new field. In an animistic society, the missionaries encounter strong beliefs in the spirit world. Immediately, the question arises "what will be the view of the mission to these beliefs?" Different approaches have been taken in the past. Malinowski, in 1945, was bold enough to say, "all efforts of European missionaries, educationalists, and administrators have failed, until now, in their treatment of witchcraft".²⁹ I would like to review the possible approaches to spirit powers, and suggest one, which is appropriate to mission in Melanesia, in light of the theology of the spiritual powers, which has been outlined in this essay.

(a) Denial of Spirit Powers

It has been common for missionaries to deny the reality of spirit beliefs, classing them as superstitions, as a result of ignorance. The presence of spirit powers is a matter of daily experience for the Melanesian. So, a denial of the reality of spirit beings is totally unsatisfactory to Melanesians. In Toabaita, in the Solomon Islands, the early missionaries denied the existence of spirit beliefs as

²⁹ Theodoor Aherns, "Concepts of Power in Melanesia and a Biblical Perspective", in *Missiology* 5-2 (1977), p. 163.

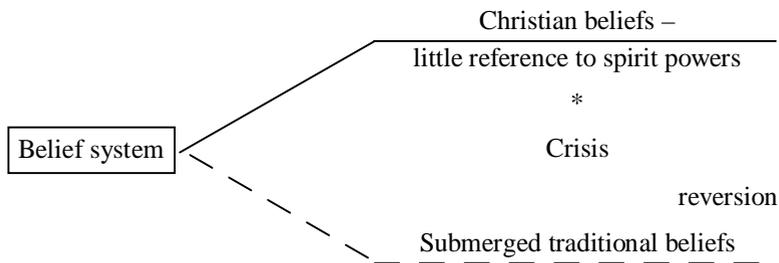
mere speculation and superstition. But, such a treatment never really did away with the belief. Festus Suruma, a Toabaitan, says, “every generation of my people will always believe in ancestral spirits. Instead of denying the whole thing, I must provide another alternative, centred on scripture”.³⁰

We have seen that, theologically, there is no basis for a denial of spiritual powers. “Satan is at his wittiest when he succeeds in persuading people that he does not exist.”³¹ A missionary, who takes this approach, surely cuts himself off from the very needs of the people, resulting from their daily life experience. He may feel that he has been successful in convincing the minds of the people that such beliefs are not valid. But this is not a matter of the mind, but the liver. The belief in spirits will go underground. It will not be abandoned.

Denial of spirit powers encourages a split-level Christianity. A Melanesian can very easily end up with a dichotomous belief system. He may normally operate, according to the Christian teaching he has accepted, even if it is unrelated to his previous religious experiences. But, in times of crisis, such as sickness or death, he quickly reverts to his submerged traditional beliefs. It is not uncommon for a professing Christian to go to a witchdoctor, or magic man, in times of sickness, especially if the Christian way has not produced the desired results.

Some missionaries have recognised the existence of spirit powers in Jesus’ time, but deny their activity today. This, too, is totally unsatisfactory for Melanesians, who *know* the reality of spirits in today’s life experiences.

I would re-echo Suruma’s cry – there must be another approach, which is biblical and practical.



³⁰ F. Suruma, “Toabaita Traditional Beliefs and Worship of Ancestral Spirits and God’s Word”, unpublished BTh thesis, Banz PNG: CLTC, 1979, p. 35.

³¹ Stott, *God’s New Society*, p. 265

(b) Mixing of Beliefs – Syncretism

Another approach, which missionaries have taken, is to accept the reality of the spirit powers, and to incorporate these beliefs into Christian teaching. The motive, as expressed by Nilles, a Catholic missionary, has been good. “The social and psychological values and merits of the old traditional practices and beliefs, and their influence upon the daily lives of the community members, are too deeply rooted to be totally discarded without leaving a vacuum of frustration.”³² A genuine attempt to indigenise has been made by keeping traditional rituals, and pouring into them new meaning. But, because of the implicit connotation of any form, often the results have been syncretism, which is questionable. Those, who take this approach, believe that these syncretistic tendencies will be overcome in future generations.

Based on this approach, missionaries have attended traditional spirit ceremonies, giving their blessing to the ritual performed in the presence of a cross. They have called upon the spirits of the ancestors, in their intercessory role, for the living community, while still stressing that these spirits do not have autonomous power over the living.³³ When Christian and traditional beliefs have been mixed, so that there is no clear understanding of the biblical truth about powers, but, rather, syncretism, then I would question the validity of such an approach. Surely there is another way.

(c) Acceptance in Theory, Denial in Practice

Most Western evangelicals, when questioned about spirit powers, would acknowledge the existence of Satan and his workers, but such a belief is divorced from their life experience. You may hear accusations cast at Satan, for his work of trying to make the Christian fall, but little thought is given to principalities and powers. So, many evangelical missionaries find themselves agreeing with Melanesians, when it comes to the concept of spirit powers, but then find themselves unable to minister to their national friends, because their experience is far from the Melanesian experience with spirit powers.

I can see two possible reactions to this situation. The first is to class everything to do with traditional beliefs as demonic, and of Satan, and so declare all customs and beliefs as “*tambu*”, not to be entered into, or spoken about. This, in fact, leaves the same vacuum that results from denial. The second is to

³²J. Nilles, “Simbu Ancestors and Christian Worship”, in *Catalyst* 7-3 (1977), p. 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

acknowledge spirit beliefs, when questioned, but ignore them in the ministry of preaching, teaching, and counselling. The content of courses in Bible colleges, or the material presented from the pulpit (by both missionaries and nationals), reflects the fact that this approach has been quite common in Melanesia.

The danger in this approach is that biblical teaching becomes unrelated to the life experience of the individual, and the community. If we do believe that scripture speaks to the experience of every individual, then we must find bridges to cross the gap between biblical doctrine and life experience. The biblical teaching on spiritual powers is very clear. The life experience of Melanesians means involvement with spirit powers. And so, in Melanesia today, we must relate the biblical teaching on spiritual powers to the life experience of Melanesians, helping them to discover that God's Word speaks to them in the total experience of their own culture.

(d) An Adequate Approach for Melanesia

We now have what I see as an appropriate answer to the question, "What should be our view of spirit beliefs?" We must acknowledge the reality of spiritual powers, know the biblical teaching concerning these powers, and relate this teaching to the life experience of those to whom we minister.

To do this, we must recognise that Paul's teaching on spiritual powers is rather abstract, as is characteristic of Greek thought. The terms Paul uses for spiritual powers (see page 39) are abstract ones. He does speak of idols, behind which are demons (1 Cor 10:20). He does warn against worshipping idols, and practising witchcraft (1 Cor 10:14; Gal 5:20). But, in general, Paul uses abstract terms and thought when speaking about powers. Melanesians are not normally abstract thinkers. We may boldly proclaim the message, "principalities and powers cannot harm you; have nothing to do with dominions and authorities; struggle against spiritual forces in Christ's strength; victory over evil spirits is yours, in union with Christ". But, I suggest, this sound biblical teaching is unintelligible to a Melanesian, for it is unrelated to his life experience. It is not that he does not encounter spiritual powers, or fear their influence on him, but it is a matter of the terminology used for these powers. Paul's terminology is, in fact, a foreign one to Melanesians. Our message needs to include the words "sorcery, ancestral spirits, spirits of the bush, *masalai* (creative spirits), *sanguma*, love magic, chants, and divination". "*Sanguma* and *masalai* cannot harm you; have nothing to do with love magic or hunting magic; struggle against the powers of the spirits of nature; victory

over every kind of evil power is yours in union with Christ” – this is the message, which is good news to Melanesians.

Yes, the powers are at work in every society. Their desire to enslave man remains unchanged. But the terminology used for spiritual powers will vary in every society. Festus Suruma says “the numerous spirit beings, known by local terms in animistic societies, cannot be anything else but the same spirit beings, known in biblical language as demons, spirits, unclean spirits, evil spirits, etc.”.³⁴

It is the task of the missionary to discover the terminology used for spiritual powers, by people in that society, and then to relate the Christian teaching on powers, in these terms, so as to speak to the life experience of the people.

Chart 1: Spiritual Powers

Paul’s terms – Greek	Pidgin terms	Mid-Wahgi terms
principalities, powers, rulers, dominion, authorities, thrones, princes of this world, lords, angels, gods, demons, idols, elemental spirits, Satan, devil, Prince of this world	spirit nogut, was, sanguma, masalai, tambaran, posin, marila, kawawar, kambung nogut, askim mambu, singsing nogut, spirit bilong daiman, spirit bilong rop, ston, wara, bik, etc.	kipe, bolim, geru, kunje, kum tangil ngo, kipe kangi, kipe wal, kipe simbil, kipe tanji, asamb, bande, enj konge, kameng
OT terms	Western world	
idols, Baal, Asherah, high places, altars, magic, spells, charms, astrology, false prophets, dreams, omens, sorcery, spirits of the dead, divination, Ex 22:18; Lev 20:6-7; Deut 18:9-13; Is 47:9-13; Jer 23; Ezek 13:18	occult, ESP, TM, human traditions, philosophy, permissiveness, immorality, materialism, affluence, political, social structures, these can be tools of evil powers	

In Chart 1, I have compared the terms for spiritual powers, used by Paul, with the terms used in Pidgin, and in the local vernacular. The striking thing is the use of concrete concepts, in relation to powers in Melanesia (some of the terms translated are sorcery, witchcraft, divination, love magic, spirits of the bush, or mountain, or stream, ginger, lime, magic parcels). It is interesting to note the use of similar concrete things in relation to powers in the Old Testament. It is not

³⁴ Suruma, “Toabaita Traditional Beliefs”, p. 38.

surprising to find this similarity, since the practical life experiences of Melanesians are closer to the Hebrew culture than the Greek culture. In particular, there are many warnings in the Old Testament about consulting the spirits of the dead (Lev 19:31; Deut 18:11; Is 8:19; Jer 27:9), and yet, there is no mention of this practice in Paul's writings. So the Old Testament is an excellent source book for helping to explain, and illustrate, in concrete terms, the abstract teachings of Paul. Culturally-equivalent stories provide practical demonstrations of God's power over evil. I will illustrate this with three such stories.

- (a) Yahweh's power is seen to be greater than the power of the Egyptian gods, as Moses challenges Pharaoh and his magicians (Ex 7-14).
- (b) Elijah, the prophet of God, demonstrates that Yahweh's power is greater than the power of Baal, in this encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel (1 Kings 18).
- (c) Josiah is a man approved by God, because he put away all the objects used in the worship of Baal, Asherah, and the stars (2 Kings 23 – see the drawing in the Good News Bible, p. 395). If Josiah had been a Melanesian, it would have been the masks, carvings, ginger plants, parcels, and bones of ancestors that were burnt in the fire.

There are stories in the New Testament, too, which provide living demonstrations of God's power over evil forces. Jesus proves He is Lord of evil powers in His encounter with evil spirits (Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-20). Paul demonstrates victory in Jesus' name, in his encounters with sorcerers and magic practices (Acts 13:6-13; 16:16-18; 19:12-19). The use of such examples, to teach the theology of powers, is essential in Melanesia, because truth is seen not so much in talk and theory, but in concrete practical demonstrations. Tippett's concept of a power encounter must be taken seriously in Melanesia, so that we don't just talk about God's power being greater than evil powers, but that we live by this truth, demonstrating it in our life, ministry, and encounters with the powers.

(e) A Note for the Western World

This application of biblical teaching to the life experience of people is a must for any culture. I can see that a theology of spiritual powers has been overlooked in the Western world, also. Spiritual powers manifest themselves in different ways in every society. The Western world, too, must be ready to recognise the clothing of the spiritual powers in their society (see Chart 1). Once the tools of the powers are discerned, Western Christians can begin to unmask the powers, to take the

biblical teaching on powers seriously in their own culture, and come to experience the liberty and victory that is to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. The Content of Our Teaching

We have already seen that our theology of spiritual powers will influence the content of our message, and, therefore, the content of our teaching. This has special application for me in my teaching ministry in a Bible college. My students need to go out with a message, which is relevant to their people. It is obvious that a Western theological curriculum will not deal adequately with the whole area of spiritual powers. It is not sufficient to add onto our Western systematic theology a section on powers, because we are in a Melanesian context. The development of an ethnotheology for Melanesia will need to take seriously the whole truth of scripture, as it is related to the spiritual powers in Melanesia. This, in itself, could be the topic of further reading and research, but, here, I would like to suggest several points of teaching that I feel need to be emphasised, if this biblical theology of powers is to be made relevant to the Melanesian life experience.

(i) God: The Maker and Owner of All Things

The doctrine of God as the Creator should be the starting point of any theology, for this truth clearly states God's sovereignty over every created thing.

This unique, Almighty God, who is holy, omniscient, omnipresent, and transcendent, is completely different to the immanent spirit beings of the Melanesian world. God is a personal being, who shows mercy, love, and compassion. He is omnipotent, His power being greater than any other power. He is the great Protector and Provider, who can shield us from any evil influence in our lives, and supply all our physical and spiritual needs. The character of God can be taught by studying His dealings with mankind, both with individuals and with nations, throughout history. This teaching on the character of God needs to be deeply embedded, at a worldview level, both in theory and practice. It is no use introducing this teaching at the time of a crisis, when thinking has reverted back to traditional beliefs. It needs to be taught in fair skies, as preparation beliefs. It needs to be taught in fair skies in preparation for the challenges, which will come with the dark skies. Then a crisis can, in fact, prove, and reinforce, this teaching.

(ii) Man: His Origin, Nature, and Purpose

Man, as a created being, has a special purpose in God's creation. He is to act as vice-regent, being responsible for God's creation. This chief purpose is to

honour and glorify God. It is as we discover what man was created to be that we realise that something has spoiled God's perfect creation. Good teaching on man, as God created him, man in his fallen condition, and man recreated in Christ, will help Melanesians to see God's intended role for them, and, in particular, their relation to spirit powers in God's world.

(iii) Spiritual Powers: Their Origin, Activity, and Evil Purposes

It is important for Melanesians to understand that evil powers were originally created good and perfect by God, their Maker. There needs to be teaching on the fall of Satan and his angels, and the entry of evil into the world. God's perfect order for creation has been disturbed by sin, such that the powers have become usurpers, dominating man, and separating him from fellowship with God. Man, in this state, needs liberating. Melanesians need to appreciate the needs of their people, who are still bound in the dominion of darkness.

(iv) Jesus Christ: The Liberator

Jesus Christ became perfect man, in order to defeat the power of sin, Satan, and death. By His death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ has won the victory over every evil power. In Melanesia, there can easily be an undue stress on Christ's death, and the power of His blood. There must be stronger teaching on the resurrection and ascension of Christ, for He must be known, and experienced, as the risen, ruling Christ. As the living Lord, He has power and authority over every other spiritual power.

(v) The Christian Life: A Break with Spiritual Powers

The need to turn away from dependence upon any kind of power, outside of Christ, needs to be strongly stressed. When speaking of powers, it is important to realise that Melanesians distinguish between powers, which bring harm (sickness, death, disaster), and powers, which bring good (gardens, successful hunting, healing, protection, obtaining a wife). A Christian is keen to have nothing to do with powers, which bring harm (Pidgin: *sanguma*, *posin*, *spirit nogut*). But those rituals and practices, which are for the good of the individual and the community, can be easily retained, for they are not seen as evil. The Pidgin translation of magic as "*posin*" actually supports this thinking, for it restricts magic to the power to kill. A better translation would be "*ol kain kain pawa*" (every kind of power), for the Bible clearly speaks against the use of any magic. It is evident that this emphasis is needed in Melanesia, because of the number of Christians, who have dissociated themselves from magic for evil purposes, but continue to use magic for

planting gardens, or fishing, or hunting. And so biblical teaching on a Christian's relationship with powers must be translated to the practices of the daily lives of Melanesians.

Conclusion

I now return to the original issue. "What is the correct thinking about spirits?"

After this investigation of the biblical teaching on spiritual powers in Paul's writings, and its implications for mission in Melanesia, I would like to pass on some advice to those working in animistic societies. We need to think seriously about the spiritual powers expressed in traditional beliefs. These powers are real and powerful to those in the society. But, we need to turn the eyes of the people to Christ, who rules supreme over the spiritual powers, as Creator, Redeemer, Victor, and Living Lord. Yes, be aware of the presence and power of spiritual powers, but know, and proclaim, the greater power of God, and the victory every believer has, in union with Christ, in this present age. Point people to the certainty of complete triumph over every spiritual power, in the return of Christ and the consummation of this age. With this clear teaching firmly fixed in your thinking, and demonstrated in your life, meet the needs of both unbelievers still bound by spiritual powers, and Christians still living in fear of the spirits.

Yes, a biblical theology of spiritual powers, which is adequately related to the life experiences of the people, will transform your life and ministry, just as it has changed my life and ministry in Melanesia today.

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