

IS THERE A DEMON IN THIS STRUCTURE? LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND ALBERT WOLTERS ON CREATION, “POWERS,” AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

CHRISTOPHER J. PAPPALARDO*

I. INTRODUCTION

The gospel is public truth. Such is the affirmation made by two independent streams of theological thought—that of Leslie Newbigin and that of the Kuyperian tradition. It may be taken as a sad reflection on the state of contemporary Christian theology that affirming the public nature of the gospel is considered distinctive. Yet we may also be thankful that the point is being compellingly promoted, and promoted from different theological backgrounds.

In June 1996, twenty-five scholars from the Kuyperian tradition met for four days with Newbigin in Leeds, England to present papers for discussion. This rare opportunity highlighted both the similarities and distinctions between the two, particularly regarding their conception of Christian public action. One major distinction arose over the course of the colloquium, typified by the interaction between Newbigin and Al Wolters. Wolters noted how Newbigin utilized the Pauline idea of “principalities and powers” as a theological lens through which to view Christian public mission, while the Kuyperian tradition found the notion of “creational norms” more relevant. For those who wish to engage the structures of human society with the gospel, this disagreement could mark the beginning of a fruitful discussion—though it has yet to gain the prominence it deserves. My purpose here is to offer the next step in this discussion by answering and addressing Wolters’s critiques. By first analyzing Newbigin’s thoughts regarding the “principalities and powers,” then analyzing Wolters’s critique of those thoughts, and finally suggesting several adjudications between the two men, I hope to commend Newbigin as a worthy complement to the Kuyperian tradition.

II. LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND THE “POWERS”

Does the message of the gospel find its only application in the hearts of individual people? According to Newbigin, many in Western society think so: “The gospel is about changing people; it is addressed to the individual conscience, not to societies and institutions. Societies and institutions will only be changed when people are changed.”¹ But Newbigin finds this individual application reductionist. The gospel is not merely a means to personal holiness, but is a radical claim that God

* Christopher Pappalardo is a Ph.D. candidate at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 120 S. Wingate St., Wake Forest, NC 27587.

¹ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 198.

has acted finally and decisively toward humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus to counter reductionist individualism, Newbigin turns to the Pauline idea of “principalities and powers.” The powers provide the biblical defense Newbigin needs to heighten the societal—in addition to the individual—ramifications of the gospel.²

Newbigin collapses several ideas into the compact phrase “principalities and powers,” often choosing instead to shorten it further to simply “powers.” He recognizes in Paul a multiplicity of words that are used with great flexibility but apparently little precision: “Such words as principalities, powers, dominions, thrones, angels, authorities, and others are used without any apparent attempt to distinguish between their meanings if indeed there is any difference.”³ To unify these terms, Newbigin identifies one word that acts as a clue to understanding this cluster of ideas—the Greek word στοιχεῖα, used by Paul in Col 2:8, 20 and Gal 4:3, 9. The word, literally meaning “elements,” stands for the necessary structural norms of society, “the structural elements in the world as we know it, from the basic structures of the physical world to the social and political structures of the nations, to the customs and traditions by which human beings are normally guided.”⁴

As Newbigin sees it, Paul applies this term to both the spiritual reality and its physical manifestation. In truth, these structures (or “norms” or “elements” or “powers”) never exist apart from their physical reality. For instance, Paul identifies the Jewish Law and the Roman Empire as two examples of powers, both of which have tangible manifestations, but represent something deeper than their specific time-bound expressions.⁵ Extending this logic outside of the Bible, Newbigin identifies several other candidates for the office of “powers” in the modern world—number, chance, race, money, and ideology.⁶

While the explicit relationship between the spiritual and the physical cannot be systematically identified, it is nonetheless clear that these two aspects are always related but never identical. Newbigin notes that every metaphor used to compare the two is inevitably spatial, even if we acknowledge that the powers do not occupy space per se. Thus we may rightly speak of the kingship that stands behind the king, or the ethos within a school, or the ideology that rules over an institution. “But,” as Newbigin reminds us, “We cannot locate [the spiritual reality] within, behind, or above its visible embodiment.”⁷ The nature of the relationship between the spiritual and its visual embodiment remains admittedly mysterious.

Drawing primarily from Colossians 1–2, Newbigin notes that these powers are a part of God’s creation, created in Christ and for Christ. Because of this, the

² Newbigin’s most robust analysis of “principalities and powers” comes in chapter 16 of his *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, entitled “Principalities, Powers, and People.” Since Wolters’s critique aims specifically at this chapter, I have limited Newbigin’s summary to that chapter. It bears mentioning, however, that Newbigin’s treatment of “the powers” throughout his work is consistently forwarded as a way of proving that the gospel affects not only the individual, but all of society as well.

³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* 203.

⁴ *Ibid.* 208.

⁵ *Ibid.* 205.

⁶ *Ibid.* 206–7.

⁷ *Ibid.* 202.

powers have a decidedly good purpose: “They are intended to serve the purpose of God as manifest in Christ.”⁸ Yet these powers do not serve Christ as they ought to, and in our everyday experience we meet the powers in rebellion against their proper Lord. The powers, which should serve their Creator, instead attempt to usurp his place. With his death, Christ has disarmed these powers, putting them under his feet to serve him, with the promise that one day he will destroy them.⁹

The Christian’s response to the powers, then, is mixed. As part of the creation, they are good. And while these powers exert force over our lives, they are necessary to prevent anarchy. Thus they should be preserved and affirmed. But when these forces become absolute, that which was created in Christ and for Christ becomes an agent of tyranny. The powers, when ranged against Christ, “become demonic.”¹⁰ As Christians, then, our role is to testify to the initial victory that Christ has wrought over these powers, and to work as “patient revolutionaries” within each structure of our society.¹¹ We are not to wage war on the world’s terms, because we recognize that our struggle is against spiritual powers, not flesh and blood. Thus our warfare will look very different than that of the world, as we use the gospel—announced in word and embodied in deed—to unmask the idolatrous powers of this present age.¹²

III. AL WOLTERS DEMURS

Despite the high profile of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, little critique has been aimed specifically at Newbigin’s application of the principalities and powers to Christian engagement in public life. This alone makes Al Wolters’s critique valuable. Although Wolters expresses great sympathy both with Newbigin’s overall project as well as with certain aspects of his discussion of the powers, he also expresses serious misgivings. During the 1996 Leeds Colloquium, Wolters delivered a paper entitled “Creation and ‘The Powers’: A Dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin,” in which he identifies three categories of “serious reservations”—exegetical, conceptual, and perspectival.¹³ As we will see, many of Wolters’s critiques hit home, others miss the mark, and others still require a synthesis of Newbigin’s thought with that of Wolters.

1. *Exegetical issues in Newbigin’s proposal.* Several issues come under Wolters’s watchful exegetical eye. As a preliminary matter, Wolters views with suspicion the indebtedness that Newbigin acknowledges to Walter Wink and his two volumes, *Naming the Powers*¹⁴ and *Unmasking the Powers*.¹⁵ Wink, he points out, follows in the

⁸ Ibid. 204.

⁹ Ibid. 204, 208.

¹⁰ Ibid. 205.

¹¹ Ibid. 209.

¹² Ibid. 210.

¹³ Albert Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’: A Dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin,” *Trinity Journal for Theology and Ministry* 4 (2010) 89.

¹⁴ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the NT* (The Powers 1; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

exegetical tradition of other twentieth-century theologians: Karl Barth, Oscar Cullman, Hendrikus Berkhof, and John Howard Yoder. This tradition, relatively recent in its development (an apparently negative feature for Wolters), has already been extensively criticized.¹⁶ Thus, whatever exegetical errors one might find in Wink and his predecessors, one can reasonably apply to Newbigin as well. However, Wolters wishes to examine Newbigin's exegesis on its own terms as well, and offers five exegetical problems.

First, Wolters finds it unlikely that the various terms Paul uses refer categorically to the same reality. Admittedly, the difference between "thrones" and "powers" and "rulers" and "authorities" (Col 1:16) may be lost on modern readers, but that does not mean Paul used the terms without precise distinction. Newbigin subsumes too many different terms under one heading without exegetical warrant.¹⁷

The next three objections flow from the first, and are examples of Newbigin's lack of precision regarding specific NT terms. The first and most significant of these terms is στοιχεῖα, which Newbigin often uses in its untranslated form as an umbrella term for all of the powers. Wolters points out that while some interpreters have taken τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου of Gal 4:3 and Col 2:8, 20 to mean "elemental spirits of the world," this is a "largely discredited" view today.¹⁸ Following Herman Ridderbos, Wolters posits that this phrase refers to the "basic principles of the world," meaning the ways in which fallen humanity organizes its existence. It is thus problematic to think of στοιχεῖα as spiritual entities at all, and this term should not be brought into the discussion of principalities and powers.¹⁹

The second Greek term that comes into Wolters's sights is ἄγγελος or "angel." Newbigin takes ἄγγελος in Revelation 2 and 3 to mean "the spiritual reality, the power—good, bad, or mixed—which is embodied in the congregation."²⁰ Such a translation, however, ignores the more basic meaning of ἄγγελος as "messenger," a much more plausible option considering the context, since these "angels" are each given a letter—a message—to deliver to their respective churches.²¹ Like στοιχεῖα, ἄγγελος does not belong in a discussion of the powers.

The third term Wolters addresses is ἐξουσία, "authority." Because the same term is used in Col 1:16 and Rom 13:1, Newbigin—following Yoder and others—understands the "authorities" of Romans to have a spiritual aspect in addition to their more mundane reality as political entities. Wolters finds this "very debatable," mainly because "there are in fact virtually no commentaries on Romans which have

¹⁵ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (The Powers 2; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Newbigin makes this indebtedness explicit in his preface (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society* x).

¹⁶ Wolters, "Creation and the 'Powers'" 88–89. Wolters does not here identify the specific exegetical problems with this tradition, nor the most relevant critics of it.

¹⁷ Wolters, "Creation and the 'Powers'" 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* 203.

²¹ Wolters, "Creation and the 'Powers'" 91.

adopted this reading of the text.”²² Like its unfortunate cousins στοιχεῖα and ἄγγελος, ἐξουσία in Romans 13 has no relevance or connection to spiritual powers.

The specific instances of exegetical sloppiness point up, for Wolters, a fundamental misunderstanding of the NT language of the powers. This is his final objection: “powers,” in the NT, do not refer to structural elements of society, but rather simply to “invisible spiritual beings of various ranks, both good ones (angels) and evil ones (demons, unclean spirits).”²³ To bolster his point, Wolters references missionary Stephen Pattemore, who even after surveying Wink’s *Naming the Powers*, proposed a translation of Col 1:16 in patently personal form: “whether they are the Jinn above, the local spirits, the Jinn who rule people, the strong evil spirits.”²⁴ What Walter Wink so firmly rejected Wolters plainly affirms—the reality of personal spirits.

2. *Conceptual issues in Newbigin’s proposal.* The cluster of problems Wolters identifies as “conceptual” may all be incorporated under one heading: “This is not very clear.” In Wolters’s words, “I find it difficult to discern much analytical clarity or consistency in Newbigin’s discussion of the powers.”²⁵ Three ambiguities strike Wolters as particularly troublesome.

First, Newbigin includes in his discussion of the “structural elements” (στοιχεῖα) such a wide array of realities that it is difficult to discern their common feature. “Structural elements” may include the Torah, Marxism, the market economy, chance, the family structure, or numbers. Wolters proposes that it would be more helpful to distinguish between mental constructs (such as ideologies) and institutions of society (such as the family).²⁶

Second, Wolters finds Newbigin unclear on whether the powers are visible or invisible. In one sense, Newbigin can refer to the powers as unseen, existing in “the heavenly places” (cf. Eph 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12); yet in another sense, these powers are also concrete physical realities. As Wolters understands it, the closest Newbigin comes to identifying the connection between the visible and the invisible is the imprecise term “embodiment.” Wolters presses the issue: *how* does the invisible “embody” the visible? From Wolters’s perspective, Newbigin’s use of the visible/invisible connection serves only to introduce ambiguity but does little to resolve it.

Third, Wolters finds Newbigin’s connection between creation and the powers confusing. Can we usefully speak of human traditions, money, or schools as powers that God created? What does it mean for these powers to be disarmed and defeated? And if disarmed and defeated, why does Christ need to destroy them? As part of the Father’s good creation, should they not rather be redeemed? “In a word,”

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 92.

²⁴ Stephen W. Pattemore, “Principalities and Powers in Urak Lawoi,” *BT* 45 (1994) 128, cited in Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’” 92.

²⁵ Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’” 92–93.

²⁶ Ibid. 93.

Wolters summarizes, “I find it difficult to find a consistent pattern in Newbigin’s statements about the powers and creation.”²⁷

3. *Perspectival issues in Newbigin’s proposal.* In addition to the more localized issues within Newbigin’s treatment, Wolters also finds fault with Newbigin’s larger theological perspective. This is the root of the conflict: while Wolters agrees with Newbigin that the gospel must have societal as well as personal implications (this, we will recall, was the context of Newbigin’s chapter), he finds the theme of “principalities and powers” insufficient and inappropriate to address these issues. The powers are real and important, he claims, but not relevant to the ways in which Christians engage in public life. A different set of categories is needed to give Christians the tools to engage the public square. Instead of “powers,” Wolters proposes that a proper understanding of the biblical idea of creation provides the lens through which we should view our engagement with the public square.²⁸

4. *Creation, not powers: Wolters proposes a “Reformational perspective.”* Wolters then outlines what he calls a “Kuyperian or Reformational” approach, one anchored in creation rather than the Pauline doctrine of powers. Central to this approach is “the distinction between normative principles and human positivization.”²⁹ God has established certain fixed normative principles as part of his creation, but allows for diversity in their tangible manifestation.³⁰ Thus what Newbigin calls the “structural elements” of society are, in fact, part of the created order. The principles provide the structure for each sphere of human existence, but the reality of sin means that all of our human positivizations—in every sphere—deviate in some way from those principles. The work of Christ must be understood in the context of creation: he came to restore every dimension of human existence, lifting the curse by aligning all of the created order back in line with the normative principles that God the Father intended.³¹

In light of creation’s centrality, Wolters sees the “principalities and powers” as personal spirits involved in this ongoing cosmic conflict. However, even though these demonic spirits are involved in world affairs, they “usually stay in the background of the empirical world of ordinary human experience.”³² Their main role in the cosmic battle, according to Wolters, is in their “capacity to influence or invade the human personality, and in this way to enlist human actions on the side of the Evil One.”³³ This may occur through demonic possession, but such influence need not be so dramatic to be patently demonic. It can also be seen as individuals promote false ideologies, pursue ruthless agendas, or inflict suffering on the weak. Wherever God’s normative principles are flouted, we may rightly assume that de-

²⁷ Ibid. 94.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. 95.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 96. The argument that Wolters gives in summary in this article is given in a fuller form in his *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

³² Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’” 97.

³³ Ibid.

mons are at work, pushing people to use their creational capacities toward brokenness, pain, and destruction.

IV. NEWBIGIN AND WOLTERS: A CRITIQUE OF A CRITIQUE

Several months after the 1996 Leeds Colloquium at which Wolters delivered his extensive critique, Newbigin offered some remarks in response to all of the papers delivered during his time there. Regarding Wolters specifically, he stated:

I must say that his criticisms have a great deal of weight in them. I think he is right in pointing out the weaknesses of my treatment, both as regards the exegesis of Scripture and as regards the internal coherence of my arguments. I have to confess that I ought to do some real re-thinking. It is, however, difficult for me now with my blindness to do detailed exegetical work However, I think there was more to my argument than Walters [*sic*] grants.³⁴

It is one of the minor tragedies of theological history that Newbigin and Wolters did not cross paths earlier, allowing their competing ideas on this issue to develop into a robust dialogue. Newbigin's comment here marks the end of the conversation. Wolters's critique, although delivered in 1996, was not published until 2010, and it appears that no effort has been made to pursue the contours of a possible "Newbiginian" rethinking in light of Wolters's charges. What follows here is the beginning of such a rethinking.

1. *Exegetical issues revisited.* By way of concession, Newbigin readily admits that areas of his argument require precision or alteration. For instance, Newbigin accepts Wolters's claim that the reference to angels in Revelation does not belong in a discussion of "the powers."³⁵ Newbigin also moves too freely from a discussion of "principalities and powers" to the Greek term *στοιχεῖα* without establishing that the two are, in fact, related. A reader unfamiliar with the texts at hand might assume that *στοιχεῖον* was common shorthand for the Pauline treatment of principalities and powers. However, as Wolters reminds us, this is a contested claim. Despite Newbigin's concessions, however, two substantive points need to be made in response to Wolters's exegetical critique.

a. *στοιχεῖον is more complicated than Wolters admits.* While Newbigin too freely assumes a close connection between the term *στοιχεῖον* and "the powers," Wolters too easily dismisses such a connection. And between the two, Newbigin's treatment of *στοιχεῖον* appears more exegetically defensible than Wolters's. It is true, as Wolters hints, that the demythologizing ways of Walter Wink have been readily criticized. Yet Wolters fails to note the continuing debate regarding the specific translation and interpretation of *στοιχεῖα* in modern literature. For Wolters and

³⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, "On the Gospel as Public Truth: Response to the Colloquium" (paper presented at the conference titled *A Christian Society? Witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Public Life of Western Culture*; Leeds, England, June 18–21, 1996) 4. Regarding Newbigin's mention of "blindness": he was not blind his entire life, but his eyesight grew increasingly worse as he aged. This conference occurred within 18 months of his death.

³⁵ Newbigin, "On the Gospel as Public Truth" 4.

Ridderbos, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου refers only to the “elemental principles of the world” and has literally no connection to Paul’s discussion of principalities, powers, or spirits. But the term στοιχεῖα has a long tradition of being associated with the principalities and powers. As David Bundrick has outlined in an article tracing the history of interpretation of στοιχεῖα, most of the patristic interpreters identified στοιχεῖα as referring to personalized powers or spiritual beings. For men like Jerome, Tertullian, and Augustine, the “elements” are twofold, referring both to the basic entities of the world—sun, moon, and stars—and to the spiritual beings controlling those physical entities.³⁶ This connection finds ample corroboration in the Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which astral spirits are closely tied to the workings of the natural world. Thus *Jubilees* 2.2 speaks of “the angels of the spirit of fire, the angels of the spirit of the winds” and 2 *Enoch* 4:1 mentions “the angels who govern the stars.”³⁷ The *Testament of Solomon* 8:2 even uses the term στοιχεῖα in this regard: “We are the 36 στοιχεῖα of the world-rulers of the darkness ... and our stars are in heaven ... and we are called as it were goddesses.”³⁸

This view of στοιχεῖα as personal spirits involved in major cosmological events (what Bundrick calls the personal-cosmological view) became the predominant interpretation in the twentieth century, leading many modern Bible translations to render this “elemental spirits” (RSV, NEB, ESV).³⁹ Among the more prominent modern scholars to make this defense (besides the translation committees) are G. H. C. MacGregor, George Caird, H. Schlier, Ralph P. Martin, and F. F. Bruce.⁴⁰ Many of these interpreters make the connection explicit between these personal στοιχεῖα and the “principalities and powers” of which Paul speaks in Col 2:15, either considering the “elemental spirits” to be a subset of the broader category “principalities and powers” or treating the two phrases as roughly synonymous.

Exegesis, of course, cannot be performed by majority rule. Wolters may be right and these contemporary interpreters may be wrong. But what this demonstrates is that we cannot merely dismiss the personal-cosmological interpretation of στοιχεῖα as a “largely discredited” view, as Wolters tries to do. Contra Wolters, many legitimate interpreters still find “elemental spirits” the most appropriate understanding of the term.

Peculiarly, though, the tradition in which Newbigin stands (and which Wolters aims to criticize) does not subscribe to the personal-cosmological view of στοιχεῖα. Wolters assumes without proving that those who posit a connection be-

³⁶ David R. Bundrick, “*Ta Stoicheia Tou Kosmou* (Gal 4:3),” *JETS* 34 (1991) 357–58.

³⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 150.

³⁸ Bundrick, “*Ta Stoicheia Tou Kosmou*” 359.

³⁹ Walter Wink, “The ‘Elements of the Universe’ in Biblical and Scientific Perspective,” *Zygon* 13 (1978) 226; Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon* 150.

⁴⁰ G. H. C. MacGregor, “Principalities and Powers,” *NTS* 1 (1954–55) 18–20; George Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) 41, 51; H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the NT* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1961) 11, 14, 23; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church’s Lord and the Christian’s Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 13–15; F. F. Bruce, “The Colossian Heresy,” *BSac* 141 (1984) 204–5.

tween στοιχεῖα and “principalities and powers” therefore must interpret στοιχεῖα as “elemental spirits.” Some do; but no one would take issue with this interpretation more than Walter Wink, who goes to great lengths to prove that Paul intended τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου to mean, much in line with Wolters’s understanding, “the elemental principles of the world.”⁴¹

Where Newbigin and Wolters part ways, then, is in the more knotty issue of the relationship between στοιχεῖα and the principalities and powers. It appears that regardless of the precise meaning of στοιχεῖα, the context of Colossians 2 demands that these two ideas connect in some way. In warning the Colossians not to return to their previous idolatrous way of life, Paul introduces the idea with the warning, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the στοιχεῖα of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8 ESV). He then explains how Christ’s crucifixion overcomes these obstacles, concluding with the statement, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities [principalities and powers] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:15). Paul then moves *back* to a warning about the στοιχεῖα: “If with Christ you died to the στοιχεῖα of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations” (Col 2:20)? The victory of Christ on the cross stands opposed to both the στοιχεῖα and the principalities and powers, and it is therefore reasonable to group the two together. If the term στοιχεῖον has no connection to the powers, the burden of proof lies on Wolters to show why Paul places the two ideas next to each other, describing them in similar fashion.

In the end, Newbigin seems to highlight a legitimate Pauline emphasis by subsuming the principalities under στοιχεῖα. As Douglas Moo notes, the term στοιχεῖα most likely refers to the literal material elements of the world, but cannot be divorced from the belief—which Paul probably held—that the material forces of the world are inextricably linked to spiritual forces. These forces may be personal or impersonal, structural or individual, and include angels and demons. Thus στοιχεῖα acts as an appropriate umbrella term for the “elemental powers of the world” (Moo’s translation), under which the principalities and powers are included.⁴²

b. *Newbigin is Berkhof’s disciple, not Wink’s*. The second point that must be made in response to Wolters’s exegetical critique is that Newbigin is not as indebted to Walter Wink as either Wolters or Newbigin claims. In his exegetical critique, Wolters worries that Newbigin has fallen prey to Wink’s faulty interpretive grid of demythologization. The suspicion is warranted: Newbigin credits Wink’s *Naming the Powers* and *Unmasking the Powers* as formative influences for his treatment of principalities and powers.⁴³ However, when we examine the main contours of Newbigin’s argument, we see that they borrow less from Wink and more from a Kuypertian thinker—one of Wink’s formative influences, Hendrikus Berkhof.

⁴¹ Wink, “Elements of the Universe” 225–44; Wink, *Naming the Powers* 67–76.

⁴² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 190–92, 234.

⁴³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* x.

To see the ways in which Newbigin's argument takes after Berkhof more than Wink, consider the progression of Newbigin's thought regarding στοιχεῖα and the "powers" in his entire corpus. Wolters limits himself to a critique of Newbigin's argument in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, but Newbigin took up the idea periodically for decades prior to that more complete formulation. He first addresses the issue in his 1966 work *Honest Religion for Secular Man*. Here Newbigin credits Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* (translated into English just four years earlier) for showing him the structural dimension of Paul's discussion of "powers." Powers are those restraining forces of human existence, Newbigin notes, preventing life from total disintegration, but also—in themselves—preventing us from coming to know God.⁴⁴ What makes these powers pernicious is their constant claim to absoluteness. However, in Christ, these powers can serve a useful purpose if their claim to finality is disarmed and they are put back in service to Christ. As Newbigin writes, "To those who have seen [the cross], the powers are no longer absolutes. The only absolute is the living Christ himself."⁴⁵

Even though Berkhof explicitly discusses στοιχεῖα as the broadest category of the "powers" in 1962, Newbigin does not pick up this language specifically until 1969, when he writes a commentary on Galatians. In this work, forced to deal with στοιχεῖα as he comes across the term in Gal 4:3, Newbigin connects the term with the structural nature of the powers. As in *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, the emphasis here is on the ambiguous nature of these structural powers: they are inevitable for human existence, but prevent us from knowing God if they are assumed to be absolute.⁴⁶

Just prior to the publication of the first volume in Walter Wink's landmark series, in 1983 Newbigin broaches the issue again, this time in *The Other Side of 1984*. The previous themes are once again found here, but have been developed in the intervening fifteen years. Now Newbigin makes the connection between στοιχεῖα and "principalities and powers" even more firm, drawing in many of the passages that feature in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*—Romans 13 and Revelation 13; Col 1:16, 20; 1 Cor 2:8; Gal 4:3–9; and Colossians 2—and noting the fluidity of Paul's terms. We also find Newbigin beginning to refer to the absolutization of these powers as an "embodiment" of demonic evil. And whereas prior to this Newbigin had been hesitant to mention contemporary examples of such evils, merely rehearsing the biblical examples of the Roman state and Jewish law, here Newbigin adds the "invisible hand" of the free market economy as an example of the στοιχεῖα gone wrong. Throughout the discussion, Newbigin credits Berkhof for the genesis of his thoughts.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM, 1966) 138.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 139.

⁴⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Set Free To Be a Servant: Studies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969) 45–47.

⁴⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches With a Postscript by S. Wesley Ariarajah* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983) 39–40.

In all of this, Newbigin follows Berkhof rather closely. Berkhof stresses the plurality of names used to describe the powers,⁴⁸ connects *στοιχεῖα* to the “principalities and powers,”⁴⁹ considers *στοιχεῖα* to be structural elements of society,⁵⁰ stresses that these powers are created in Christ and for Christ,⁵¹ discusses the dual role of the powers as both keeping human life afloat and distancing us from God,⁵² notes that these powers become demonic when claiming absolute loyalty,⁵³ and argues that the church is to engage in public life by subjecting all of these powers to the absoluteness of Christ.⁵⁴

By the time Walter Wink emerges on the scene in 1986, Newbigin had already steeped himself in Berkhof’s thought—and largely appropriated it for himself—for over two decades. Wink does not create a new paradigm for Newbigin, but supplements what Berkhof had begun. Thus it is no surprise to see in Wink’s volumes the emphasis on the fluidity of power language in the NT, the connection of the powers with structures of society, or the claim that these powers become demonic when claiming absolute allegiance.⁵⁵ The elements that Wink adds, interestingly enough, are the aspects that Wolters finds most problematic. Two bear mentioning. First, Wink makes much more of the visible/invisible connection between these powers: “Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form—be it a church, a nation, or an economy—and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world.”⁵⁶ Second, Wink gives some more contemporary examples of powers that Newbigin borrows—specifically numbers and chance.⁵⁷ Regarding the latter addition, Wolters’s disagreement seems warranted: borrowing some of the more specific examples from Wink is more confusing than helpful. Regarding the former (as will be seen below), Wink’s contribution appears faithful to Scripture.

Both of these borrowings, however, are minimal. The real influence of Wink on Newbigin is not seen in any specific formulation of his doctrine of the powers. *Newbigin is not Wink’s disciple*. Instead, Wink influences Newbigin by simply reminding him of the importance of power language in the NT and stressing its relevance today. This is precisely how Newbigin phrases it: “Walter Wink in his series of volumes on the principalities and powers has helped us to see afresh *the relevance to our situation* of the Biblical language about the powers. It is not true, Wink reminds us, that the Church’s message is addressed only to individual people.”⁵⁸ Or elsewhere:

⁴⁸ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1962) 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 28–29.

⁵² *Ibid.* 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 58–59.

⁵⁵ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* 99–102.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

⁵⁷ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* 138, 140; Cf. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* 206–7.

⁵⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 74. *Italics mine.*

“Walter Wink ... [has] helped us to see the reality of the New Testament language about the principalities and powers in a way that has, I think, *caused many of us to rethink some of the rationalist assumptions* with which we dismissed all the New Testament language in an earlier day.”⁵⁹ What Wink brings to the table is a robust analysis of Scripture that forces rationalistic and individualistic Westerners to come to grips with an essential NT theme. Newbigin accepts this while avoiding some of Wink’s more problematic conclusions.

Why does this matter for Wolters’s critique? First, while Wolters does not attack Wink directly, he does make certain assumptions regarding Newbigin’s treatment of angels and demons. Namely, Wolters assumes that Newbigin, like Wink, is attempting to demythologize the entire NT language about angels and demons, collapsing all of it into modern categories. Wolters seems concerned to preserve an emphasis on Satan and demonic spirits that afflict individual people, an emphasis that Wink would find laughable.⁶⁰ Newbigin, however, notes that he agrees with Wolters that personal spiritual beings exist: “I do not doubt the existence of invisible heavenly powers, both good and evil,” Newbigin writes in defense. “But the question at issue is the relation of these to the structures of human life, such as the State.”⁶¹ Is the realm of the demonic to be confined to individual demonic influence, or are structures included as well? Here Wink has something to teach us.

Second, if Newbigin is really indebted more to Berkhof than to Wink, Wolters’s alternative approach—what he labels “Kuyperian or Reformational”—loses some of its distinctness. Wink may have developed his ideas separate from the Kuyperian tradition, but Berkhof developed his from *within* that tradition. Berkhof saw no contradiction between the Kuyperian emphasis on bringing the gospel to bear in the public square and applying Paul’s doctrine of the “powers” for that engagement. Indeed, it appears that Berkhof uses Paul’s power language as the specific application of his Kuyperian emphasis. What Newbigin proposes, then, need not be seen as an alternative to the Reformational approach, but may rightly complement it.

2. *Conceptual issues revisited.* Wolters’s conceptual critique centers on the ambiguity inherent within Newbigin’s argument and word choice. In large part, Wolters’s questions here are prescient ones, and it would be beneficial for anyone adopting Newbigin’s paradigm to be more precise, specifically when giving examples of στοιχεῖα today. As one example, Wolters notes, “It may not be accurate to say that God has created kingship, but it does make sense to say that the institution of kingship is a human positivization of God’s normative creational structure for

⁵⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel and Our Culture* (London: Catholic Missionary Education Centre, 1990) 8. Italics mine.

⁶⁰ Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’” 97. As one of many instances of that scorn, here is Wink: “It is as impossible for most of us to believe in the real existence of demonic or angelic powers ... flapping around in the sky ... as it is to believe in dragons, or elves, or a flat world.” Wink, *Naming the Powers* 4.

⁶¹ Lesslie Newbigin, “On the Gospel as Public Truth” 4.

the political order.”⁶² In other words, kingship may not be one of God’s created “powers” *per se*, but political order may be. This is a helpful corrective.⁶³

Two points must be made in Newbigin’s defense, however. Both concern the locus of the supposed ambiguity in Newbigin’s writing. First, the ambiguity regarding the visible/invisible nature of the powers is not original to Newbigin. This appears to be Pauline in origin. When Paul says that the “rulers of this age” “crucified the Lord of glory,” he also points out that these rulers are “doomed to pass away” (1 Cor 2:6–8). In one sense, he seems to be referring to Herod and Pilate and the Jewish leaders. But to say that these men will pass away—many of whom already had—is hardly worth stating. The visible ruler and the invisible ruler appear to be connected here. Or consider Paul’s instruction for believers to wrestle “against the cosmic powers over this present darkness” in Eph 6:12, instead of battling against “flesh and blood.” Either this means that the visible world is not worth engaging in—thus cultural separatism—or this means that Paul intends his readers to know that the real battle they have in front of them is *more* than merely visible, but has a powerful invisible component as well. Wolters’s question for Newbigin is also a question for Paul: What exactly is the relationship between the visible manifestations of evil and the spiritual reality?

Additionally, when Wolters quibbles that Newbigin is imprecise in relating the visible to the invisible, he misses the implications of Newbigin’s perceptive point that we only meet the invisible in the form of the visible. This is a bold claim, and forms the basis of Newbigin’s motivation for cultural engagement. Yet because of Newbigin’s imprecision, Wolters does not fully engage this claim. But this is a claim worth considering. Are structural ills backed by an invisible spiritual force? Wolters implies that this is not the case, but if it is, it has massive implications for the way in which we engage public issues.

Second, Wolters exhibits frustration with Newbigin on another area of ambiguity that Newbigin seems to have borrowed directly from Paul. As Newbigin mentions, “When Walters [*sic*] says that he does not understand my statement that the powers are created in Christ; that they have been disarmed in the Cross and that they will be ultimately abolished at the end, I must simply pass his question on to St. Paul, for I was simply repeating the teaching of Colossians 1:15–20, Colossians 2:8 and following, and 1 Corinthians 15.”⁶⁴ Wolters finds it difficult to discern a pattern in Newbigin’s statements regarding the “powers” and their relationship to creation, but the specific ambiguity he mentions is hardly unique to Newbigin: “If the powers,” Wolters writes, “after their rebellion, were defeated by Christ and disarmed, why do they need to be destroyed before Christ hands over his kingdom

⁶² Wolters, “Creation and the ‘Powers’” 96.

⁶³ Newbigin himself admits as much, stating, “I ought to begin by drawing attention to the fact that I have never had training in philosophy and have never held an academic post. . . . Those who have been kind enough to study my works have been accustomed to using words in a precise technical sense. This has led to misunderstandings of my intention.” Newbigin, “On the Gospel as Public Truth” 1.

⁶⁴ Newbigin, “On the Gospel as Public Truth” 4.

to the Father?"⁶⁵ Newbigin is correct, however, to note that what Wolters finds troublesome here is merely a paraphrase of Col 2:15 and 1 Cor 15:24. Admittedly, Newbigin may have borrowed Paul's language without providing appropriate elaboration, but the language itself is biblical. While Wolters's question requires an answer, neither Wolters's nor Newbigin's system inherently removes this thorny issue. If Wolters wishes to systematize Paul's theology regarding creation and the powers, he will be faced with the same ambiguities.

3. *Perspectival issues revisited.* Someone unfamiliar with either Newbigin or Wolters may find it difficult to discern the perspectival difference that Wolters outlines in his critique. After all, both men affirm that there are structural elements to the world that have been created by Christ and for Christ, that these structures are warped by human sin, and that the scope of Christ's redemption applies to these corporate areas of life just as much as to the individual. As Michael Goheen summarizes it, "Both want to preserve what is creationally good and oppose what is distorted by idolatry."⁶⁶ Are the two men really that far apart?

The true difference between the two men becomes clearest as Wolters gives the outline to his alternative approach. Both men agree that the structures of society, though good in essence, are broken and in need of Christ's redemptive healing. The difference lies here: Wolters stresses creation in his understanding of social witness, while Newbigin finds this dangerous, instead emphasizing the cross and eschatology.⁶⁷

This can best be seen in the questions the two men ask as they approach societal issues. Newbigin, using the rubric of "powers," asks, "What is the spirit at work in this structure? And how can that spirit be brought into service to Christ?" Newbigin asserts that beginning with Christ is the only truly Christian option. In contrast, Wolters asks, "What is the creational norm or law operative in this structure, and how can we shift the direction of that structure to align with that norm?"⁶⁸ Central to this question, then, is the desire to know God's creational "law" for each sphere of society. This question begins with creation instead of Christ.

Newbigin expresses deep apprehension over the idea of creational norms. If we are not to conceive of societal structures as powers to be devoted to Christ, he posits, but rather as arenas in which we must discern a creational norm, the critical question becomes, "Where exactly are these 'norms' to be found?"⁶⁹ Wolters mentions that it is possible to discern these norms "through empirical study and historical experience."⁷⁰ But Newbigin finds this approach fraught with danger, giving too much credence to natural law and downplaying the uniqueness of Christ. As

⁶⁵ Wolters, "Creation and the 'Powers'" 94.

⁶⁶ Michael Goheen, "Mission and the Public Life of Western Culture: Lesslie Newbigin and the Kuyperian Tradition," in *The Gospel and Our Culture Network Newsletter* 26 (1999) 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Wolters, *Creation Regained* 13–52.

⁶⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, "On the Gospel as Public Truth" 2.

⁷⁰ Wolters, *Creation Regained* 39.

Newbigin flatly states, “The nature of God’s order has been revealed in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ; that he is the word through whom all things were made; that in him all things have their coherence; that they are made for him all finally to be reconciled in him. *There is no other place we are to look for God’s norms.* Here I stand with the Barmen declaration.”⁷¹

Newbigin’s mention of the Barmen declaration shows how pernicious he finds Wolters’s use of creational norms. The Barmen declaration was a statement issued by the confessional churches of Germany in the 1930s, meant to reject the apostasy of the Nazi state church. Newbigin saw the very notion of creational norms—especially when tied closely to “empirical study and historical experience”—as in danger of drifting toward warped natural law theology, potentially supporting a demonic abuse such as the Nazi regime. The only ground to reject an evil structure, then, is not by appealing to creational principles, but to the centrality of Christ in the witness of the church. After all, as Newbigin writes, “‘Principles’ can easily become demonic.”⁷²

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A few concluding remarks are in order. First, it appears that despite Wolters’s argument to the contrary, NT exegesis suggests a connection between the seemingly impersonal language of “elements” and the more personal language of “principalities and powers.” Newbigin is right to include στοιχεῖα in his discussion of the “powers.” Still, Wolters offers much needed correction in the direction of precision. Just because Paul piles up terms without distinctions in his discussion of the powers, we need not follow suit. We can be more exegetically responsible by explaining how terms relate to one another. For instance, it seems promising to follow Douglas Moo’s distinction by thinking of the στοιχεῖα as a broad term referring to the basic elements of the world—essentially the “stuff of creation”—which would include personal spirits.⁷³ No personal spirit, nor any impersonal “principle,” should take the place of Christ as absolute. When any aspect of God’s creation is absolutized, powers of darkness are at work.

Second, it appears fruitful to speak of demonic activity in corporate and structural situations as well as in individual ones. A government, nation, or family can have a “spirit” in more than a metaphorical sense. Most people, for instance, have the experience of encountering an institution that is rather corrupt, but noting that the individuals *within* the institution do not seem to be the corrupting factor. In fact, the individuals involved often sense the distortion but feel powerless to change it. The whole is not merely the sum of its parts, and applying the Pauline idea of powers to these situations can give us a helpful category to resist such institutional evils. Wolters’s application of the demonic, in contrast, is patently individualistic. Demons only interact with us by influencing specific people. Thus it is not the ideolo-

⁷¹ Lesslie Newbigin, “On the Gospel as Public Truth” 3. Italics mine.

⁷² Lesslie Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” *Theology* 84 (1981) 361.

⁷³ Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* 192.

gy or the institution that is demonic, but the people driving it. This ignores the complicated nature of human institutions, and removes an impetus to bring the gospel to bear in public arenas. If systems are part of God's creation, they can be "demonized" as much as people. Newbiggin's application seems more inherently public in its scope, and provides a strong basis for opposing structural distortion.

Third, we must retain a place for personal demons and angels. Newbiggin does not deny their existence like Wink does, but he downplays their significance to the point of irrelevance. This is a surprisingly Western and myopic angle for him to take. In this regard, Wolters is right to bring in the experience and expertise of missionaries, since it is often those engaged in the non-Western world that testify to the ubiquitous influence of personal spiritual beings. The pervasiveness of "power" and "spirit" language in the NT may be an embarrassment to many Westerners—to be interpreted solely according to "systems," as in Wink. But most non-Western people (and most people throughout history!) readily accept these ideas without question. This, of course, extends beyond Paul into the world of the Gospels and Acts, in which Jesus and the apostles are consistently meeting personal spirits and engaging in spiritual warfare with them. We may have the technology to explain diseases in a way they lacked, but we would be arrogantly foolish to assume that personal spirits are therefore not at work.

Finally, both Newbiggin's and Wolters's proposals offer excellent perspectives from which to engage in public issues from a Christian standpoint. They are not competing ideals, but complementary voices encouraging contemporary believers to once again proclaim, "The gospel is public truth." Wolters's perspective stresses the creational ideal, while Newbiggin stresses the necessity for a Christological and cruciform response. Both of these emphases are necessary, and both can easily be taken to an unhealthy extreme. What is more, both proposals require a deep saturation with Scripture in order to discern the contours of a faithful response in each particular sphere of life. We would do well to combine the best of both aspects. So we should ask: What is God's creational desire in this structure? How has that structure been demonized, warped by sin and idolatry? And how can this power be brought under the lordship of Christ?