GETTING STARTED
WHY CHURCHES SHOULD TAKE RISKS

HOUSING JUSTICE

Dr Stephen Backhouse explores the theology of the call to be brave

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This is for anyone who claims to be a follower of the way of Jesus, is in a position of institutional responsibility, and as a result of that responsibility resists putting their institution at risk.

The New Testament contains a wealth of information when it comes to seeing how the earliest followers of Jesus organised themselves, and what attitude they took towards the institutions, resources and forms of life they had inherited. They referred to such things as "powers and principalities". It is from their open-handed attitude towards these things that we can derive our approach to risk when it comes to institutions for which we are responsible.

Despite popular (and unpopular) opinion, "powers and principalities" are not merely the realm of faith healers and exorcists. Sometimes in the New Testament they refer to demons and angels. But most of the time these words and concepts are used to refer to social and political institutions: government, traditional holidays, families, measurements of distance and time, common sense and the rule of law are all described using "power and principality" language. The common thread linking spiritual beings with human institutions is that a principality is a faceless force which influences our life. Furthermore, it is a phenomenon which had a creator and an original purpose. The principality is angelic when it accepts its created nature and purpose. It is demonic when it bursts its bounds, claims too much and acts like a self-made little god. Following Jesus, who reminded the Pharisees that the Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath, the early Christian response to powers that burst their bounds was to put them back in the box. "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether principalities or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." (Col 1:16) The book of Colossians is a good example of this way of thinking, using "powers and principalities" language to describe the range of forces that were set against the way of Jesus. Inherited morality, national allegiance, religious observations, legal demands, the empire of Rome, and yes, even spiritual creatures, are all seen as powers which were exposed as grasping for dominance. "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Col. 2:15)

The story of the powers gone right is the story of humans arranging themselves in ways that lead to the right worship

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of God and shalom: peaceful flourishing amongst all people. The story of powers gone wrong is the story of structures, organisations and inherited forms of life that resist having their supremacy challenged, placing the good of the institution above that of the people it was created for. Principalities that resist re-formation dig their heels in, entrenching themselves in their power and keeping their resources out of circulation. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mtt 20:25) The earliest followers were highly aware of the tendency for man-made institutions to burst their bounds and claim too much. The Christian people charged with responsibility for the structures and resources they had inherited thus took a stance that was open to risk. They did not see themselves primarily as preserving or prolonging their institutions (families, religious organisations, economic networks, national groups). Instead they were open-handed with these things, willing to give away accumulated power or restructure if that is what best served people according to the way of Jesus. A case in point can be found in Acts 6 where the inherited traditional responsibility to care for one's own poor was deliberately dismantled by the appointment of Stephen and the other deacons to make sure that resources were distributed, and Greek widows flourished. Likewise, the common sense and conservative ordering of the traditional family roles were upended by the Christian imagination. Where Romans naturally assumed the rightful ordering of the family hierarchy, with everyone ranged under the man in decreasing levels of importance and personal agency, books such as Ephesians and 1 Peter risk the institution of family and hierarchical power by insisting that an attitude of submission was for everyone. "Servants submit to your masters... Masters do likewise". The concrete result of the effect of this teaching can be seen in the early church practice where everyone "considers others as more important than themselves". (Phil. 2) The Christian ethic was not confided to individual lives. They knew that following the way of Jesus is corporate, organised, and instituted: baked into the household codes and rules of life that can be found in multiple places throughout the New Testament. Organised obedience to the way of Jesus that eschews accumulated power is spiritual warfare. It is, for example, the politically radical practice of mutual submission in Ephesians 5 which forms the bedrock of the struggle against powers and principalities in Ephesians 6.

The housing crisis will not be solved without taking big risks. Yet it is one thing for individuals to risk their own resources for personal gain, and quite another when what is being risked is the inherited legacy of institutional, shared and organised public goods. Housing is not a private matter. The issue of housing takes in the whole gamut of interconnected human life: economics, business structures, relational networks, institutions, land management, historical legacy, inherited traditions and other forms of social and political organisation.

Our hope is that organisations made up of people following the way of Jesus will embrace risk, even (especially!) when it means reforming their institutions and using their inherited resources to serve people well. An aversion to risk can be angelic when it takes the form of good stewardship: using the resources well that one has inherited and leaving them to the next generation better than you received them. But aversion to risk in this sense is only "good" if the institution we are stewarding is doing what it should do and serving the people it should serve. An aversion to risk becomes diabolical when it preserves the institution because it is the institution. Here, inherited resources or forms of life take precedence over the flourishing of our neighbours. This is especially a problem for followers of Jesus, because the only point of any of our institutions is to lead to the flourishing of our neighbours. Love God and love your neighbour. There is no greater commandment.