

Seeing Things
Whole

Thinkpiece #2

Assumptions Behind Our Work On The Theology of Institutions

by Richard Broholm
and Colleagues
September, 1994

Note to the Reader

This is one of a series of think pieces from *Seeing Things Whole*, an action-research project focused on the developing a theological understanding of organizational life. As you will quickly gather from your reading of this and the other think pieces, our work on the theology of institutions is very much a work in progress.

As reader, then, you are entering into our conversation that is in the midst of forming and clarifying itself. These think pieces have been one way that the group of colleagues involved in this project have been attempting to surface and invite critique around some of the assumptions which underlie and guide our efforts. Some of these ideas will evolve as the exploration continues. Others will undoubtedly fall by the wayside.

What is clear, however, is that there are a growing number of friends who wish to be part of this emerging conversation — persons who care deeply about pressing our understanding of what it means for institutions to stand fully accountable to God for the faithful exercise of their gifts and resources.

Welcome to the dialogue.

Seeing Things Whole
423 West Oxbow Road
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Think Piece #2

Some Assumptions Behind Our Work On The Theology of Institutions

*Richard Broholm and colleagues
September, 1994*

The focus and structure of this “Think Piece” and the one to follow is different from the first. Instead of tackling a specific issue such as the relationship of the “field of influence” to organizational “offices” or the content of the nine strategic lenses I want to try and unearth the assumptions that serve as the foundation for this whole work with particular emphasis on those assumptions that relate to the model of the “three-fold office”.

Further the format for this effort will be a fictional dialogue between myself and all of you as if we were seated in the same room (a lovely thought that I hope we can bring to pass at some point in this work). Some of the questions or comments “you” will be making in this conversation actually did come from you as we have conversed over the last several months. But most will represent my sense of what may be on your minds or what is on my mind as critical questions and issues. Using this device I hope to engage your help in probing those assumptions, hidden or simply unexamined, undergirding this work.

My hope is that this device will better enable all of us to clarify and test our assumptions, as well as pose new questions to be explored. For this particular “think piece” it would be most helpful to me if you would make your comments, raise additional questions, etc. on this document and send it back to me. For that reason I have allowed an extra wide left margin. Of course, I would also welcome any more extensive written responses and/or personal phone conversations to deepen the dialogue. But initially it would be particularly helpful to have your written notations alongside the actual dialogue.

In the dialogue, for shorthand purposes, I will be designated as DB and all of you will be a common voice designated as COLleagues. So let’s go!

COL: You know, basically I am excited to be a part of this effort and am challenged to think in new ways about my faith and how it connects to my organization. But I also need to admit that I have a ton of questions and there are times when I wonder if we haven’t walked through a door that leads no where.

DB: My hunch is that most of us could, at times, echo those same sentiments. That’s why I’ve invited you all here. I would hope that we could be completely honest with each other about both our affirmations and our doubts regarding this effort to build or uncover a theology of institutions. I believe this will be helpful no matter where it leads. At the very least, we should be able to identify and uncover those assumptions that presently

shape this work. Hopefully that will also help us lay the groundwork for the future. So where do we begin?

COL: Since I wasn't a part of this effort early on, it would help me understand what were the motivating influences which got you started in the first place? Why did you feel it was important?

DB: Well, for me, this effort to reflect theologically about institutions has taken shape within the broader context of a lifetime of involvement in the movement to recover the Reformation conviction that all of us--not just ordained clergy-- are called to be servants, ministers of Jesus Christ. The first intimations of a need for a theology of institutions, however, came during my years with Metropolitan Associates (MAP) of Philadelphia. It was during the tension-filled 1960's that MAP was launched as an action-research project by several denominations. Our stated purpose "was to engage in missionary action for the sake of a common witness to and participation in Christ's work of renewal in the city".

MAP was one of a handful of experimental projects spawned by the World Council of Church's study on the "Missionary Structure of the Congregation". It was an attempt to respond to the need for a fresh understanding of the meaning of biblical faith in a world dominated by large institutions. I can recall, Jitsuo Morikawa, our founder and first director, saying again and again "*Our job is not to jump on this hot issue or that. We are an action-research project for the church, to help illumine, provoke and summon the institutions of the city to their calling. We are here to try and discover a form of public ministry in the business, governmental and social organizations of this city.*"

COL: Sounds simple enough. How did you decide to tackle it?

DB: The way Jitsuo framed the problem meant that we were forced to deal with the meaning of lay witness and ministry in a radically different way than we ever had before. He pushed us to think about ministry and mission not only in individual but in institutional terms. Long before most church leaders, Jitsuo recognized that life was increasingly being formed and shaped by the organizations in which people worked and expended much of their life energy. He said that these organizations are the hands and fingers by which people's lives are either enriched and nurtured or diminished and destroyed. He believed that the Biblical mandate to "love our neighbor" was often most profoundly experienced or denied by the way Christians served leadership roles within organizations. Though he didn't speak about the need for a theology of institutions in those days, Jitsuo, intuitively knew that the church needed to find a way to address these "powers and principalities" and call them to faithfulness.

COL: This may feel like a diversion, but when you talk about "powers and principalities" and use that phrase to describe institutions, I'm reminded of Paul's letters and his understanding of the interconnectedness of the natural world and the way in which Christ relates to the whole of creation.

DB: It's not a diversion at all. Jitsuo drew heavily on Paul's way of thinking about God's reconciling activity. One of his favorite passages was in the letter to the Colossians where Paul wrote:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”
(Colossians 1:15-20)

COL: That really is a powerful assertion. It shatters the common assumption that the Christian story and the good news of the Gospel is only concerned with the redemption and reconciliation of individuals! Paul presses us toward a much broader understanding of God's ongoing interest in the created order which, for me, includes organizations. Walter Wink picks up on this Biblical truth in his own study on the "powers" when he says, *"The Powers are created. The Powers are fallen. The Powers will be redeemed."* But go ahead. What happened at MAP? I'd like to have you return to the MAP history and tell us what happened. Did you develop a theology of institutions?

DB: No. In fact, as I indicated, to the best of my memory we didn't even use the term back then. Our attention was focused on the question of institutional change and how groups of people could bring it about. Our hard experience told us that individuals, working alone and in isolation, rarely produced any lasting change. So we experimented with support groups or "change agent teams", as we called them. A lot of our energy was poured into developing processes for group envisioning and strategizing which utilized the kind of wisdom and insight that can come from drawing on diverse perspectives around a common vision. We designed and tested these ways of thinking and seeing both in churches and in "secular" organizations. Systems theory ... Paul's understanding of the church as the body of Christ ... Paulo Friere's research on "consciencization" ... Polak's study on vision ... and the problem-solving process called Synectics — all of these contributed to shaping our work and thinking in that effort.

COL: I want to make sure I don't lose the thread here. Say a bit more about the relevance of this effort at MAP for our present work around a theology of institutions.

DB: The theological reflection model we are currently working on had its inception in the group process originally designed in MAP. In addition to these process resources, the MAP staff also did some ground-breaking work on identifying institutional values. This work around values turned out to be very important several years later when, at Andover Newton, we began to explore the model of the three-fold office of Christ as a window to theologially reflect on "secular" organizations. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Perhaps, most important of all, we found ourselves stretching to think about institutions and their role in society in a way most of us had not done before. If you'll recall the temper of the late 1960's and early 70's, institutions were under attack for all their inadequacies and destructive policies. It was hard for Christians who were leaders in these institutions to feel at all comfortable with their role. You may remember that during that time John Gardner insightfully observed that institutions were being trapped between unloving critics on the outside and uncritical lovers within. His plea was for the development and support of loving critics and critical lovers — people who could clearly see the institution's failures but also their potential; leaders who were willing to risk and invest themselves in enabling our institutions to truly serve society.

Another reason we had to think about institutions in new ways had to do with the mix of people who were part of MAP's work. MAP was made up of a vast cross-section of persons giving leadership in a variety of organizations around Philadelphia; many of which were in conflict with each other. For example, the MAP community included a Vice President of a chemical company and the union organizer who picketed it or the representative from the Mayor's office and the Black Power community organization angry about city policy. We found ourselves having to listen to each other and reflect theologically in genuinely new ways. Those of us with seminary training had not really been prepared for this kind of conversation. We were, to borrow a phrase from Bob Greenleaf, being compelled to strain to "see things whole." This effort to see things whole challenged us to regard and understand institutions and systems of institutions in all their complexity. Even more of a stretch in some ways was the effort to embrace the inevitable tensions which we discovered between conflicting "goods" not so much as a problems but rather as an opportunity for faithfulness.

I don't think I really understood the significance of that effort back then.

COL: What happened to MAP? Is it still in existence?

DB: No. It went the way of many 60's programs. When denominations found their funds drying up because of their social activism and the consequent reaction of many conservative church members, budgets were cut dramatically. MAP closed its doors in 1974 with its work essentially unfinished. The staff scattered. I went into consulting and eventually came to the Boston office of an international management consulting firm.

COL: What drew you back to this work?

DB: My time with Hay Associates was incredibly helpful and formative in shaping my thinking about organizations. But after a few years I felt called to once again pick up my vocation around the ministry of the laity. So I returned to my alma mater, Andover Newton, for a year of graduate study to reflect on the MAP experience and what it might have to say about any future endeavor. One thing led to another. With the encouragement of George Peck, then Dean of the seminary, we launched a five year action-research project to explore what the Church might do differently if it really was committed to the full ministry of the whole people of God. That research, among other things, revealed once again to me how little attention

the Church had spent on trying to understand and illumine the content of lay people's workplace ministries.

Then, George Bauer, a long time friend who was an executive with IBM and deeply committed to his own workplace ministry, proposed funding a small study to examine the specific role of economic institutions in American society and what theology might have to say to them. If you recall the early 80's it was the time when Reagan economics dominated the landscape, on one hand, and liberation theology was making a biting critique of economic institutions, on the other. George, believed that a group of theologians, ethicists, economists and business leaders--reflecting together--might be able to shed some light on this very heated debate.

COL: That sounds as if it could have been a promising dialogue. What happened?

DB: The group met for a year. Over that time several insights emerged which have informed our subsequent effort to develop a theology of institutions:

1. Not surprisingly, we found that the conversation between economists, theologians and business practitioners was difficult. Not only because we shared different assumptions, but also because there was no common language that made communication easy. Each group preferred the dialogue to proceed on ground that was comfortable and familiar to them. And though all were persons of faith, the language of faith--theology--did not provide that ground either.
2. Though it was not a startlingly new thought, our conversations reinforced the conviction that economic institutions exist in an ecology of institutions in which each institution has a unique mission but is dependent upon other institutions for how that mission is exercised. Further, George spoke about the "envelope reality". He described how no organization exists in a vacuum. Every organization lives in and is bounded by a series of "envelopes" which set boundaries and exercise constraints on what the organizations can and cannot do. For economic institutions some of their significant "envelopes" are government agencies and their regulatory policies. This institutional inter-dependence is tension-filled but absolutely essential for a healthy society and productive institutions.
3. Related to this and perhaps, the most important insight to emerge was the acknowledgment, particularly by the practitioners, that "bottom-line thinking" (eg. the idea that one value in an organization is more important than any other and, therefore, ultimately holds preeminence over all others) is archaic. For decades profit or economic viability had been seen as the ultimate bottom-line value. More recently some have suggested that the "bottom-line" is really customer service or the well-being and morale of the workforce. But in every case the assumption was that ultimately one value or purpose needed to prevail over all others, thus "the bottom-line".

To reinforce this assumption, one of the members of the group shared an article from Harvard Business Review by Paul Sherwin, the former President of Phillips Products Company. In the article, "The

Ethical Roots of the Business System” Sherwin said that business is a system of interdependent members that can thrive only when all its members are given **equal** emphasis. To act ethically a manager has to ensure that the owners, employees, and customers and the legitimate values they represent all share in the business’s gain. *“What each member receives is constrained by what other members require, and no member can, in the long run, enjoy a disproportionate share. Beside being interdependent, the members of the system are entirely equal in importance. Business people often claim primacy for capital, perceiving it as the fuel of the enterprise, while consumers tend to assume that the whole point of the business is to provide them with goods and services. But no member of a system can be primary. Since the contribution of every member is necessary and no contribution is sufficient, all members are equal.”*

COL: Echoes of Paul’s description of the body of Christ!

DB: Yes, one of the members of our group was quick to see that as well and he even went on to suggest that the metaphor of Christ’s body could apply to institutions as well as to persons.

COL: Is that what led you to undertake the work on a theology of institutions using the model of the threefold office of Christ?

DB: In hindsight, I would identify it as a clear but probably unconscious influence. There were several other, more tangible factors, as well. Bob Lynn, who was then Vice President for Religion of the Lilly Endowment, asked me if I would assume the administrative responsibility for what came to be known as the Robert. Greenleaf Center. It was assumed that this task would not take much time and I could continue as the head of the Center for the Ministry of the Laity.

This assignment brought me into direct and frequent conversation with Robert Greenleaf. Bob Greenleaf, unlike Jitsuo Morikawa, was not a churchman. He had no formal theological training and probably would not have called himself a “Christian believer”. But through his lifetime of management research at AT&T and then subsequently on his retirement from that corporation to work as a consultant with universities, foundations, corporations and church institutions he gradually came to the conviction that *“a theology of institutions could be a critical resource in the development, preparation and sustenance of persons who were committed to being regenerative agents within institutions”*.

He began to press us at the Center to undertake the effort to create a theology of institutions. He wrote in one letter *“So long as churches have only a theology of persons they cannot wield the needed influence on institutions and their leaders.”* He suggested that the church’s theological preoccupation with individuals tends to focus people’s thinking on *“how to ease the hurt of the system, and not on how to build a system that can have a positive, growing, liberating, humanizing impact on people.”*

Simultaneously with Bob’s influence, Jitsuo himself also began to press us at the Center and the seminary to address this gap in the church’s theological thinking. He wrote in one letter *“If humankind is called to affect history and the reshaping of the world, then men and women in the business, political, social, health educational and physical planning institutions must*

see themselves under the mandate of calling. This means that every institution is confronted with the pressing question, 'To what end?' To what purpose do we produce chemicals, educate children, build highways, elect officials, administer medicine, and provide social services? The church has commendably focused its theological discipline upon the welfare of individual persons....Therefore the ministry of the church is concerned and practiced as largely ministry to persons. But today, more than in the past, the fate or welfare of human life is powerfully affected by the institutions of society; in fact, the future is being largely shaped by these economic, political and social institutions of our culture, so that the role of institutions, the moral and social accountability of institutions, becomes perhaps the number one agenda in our historical enterprise. How to confront these powerful organizations, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us, on the one hand, and how to evoke and provoke them to a fresh discovery and discernment of their true purpose and calling, on the other hand, is the task of an American, indigenous, evocative theology.'"

COL: That's a pretty specific mandate. How could anyone resist the suggestive powers of two such persuasive men!

DB: (Laughing) You're right, but the final nudge was Bob Lynn's decision to provide the Center with a small grant from the Lilly foundation to formally undertake this work.

COL: So how did you decide to go about it?

DB: We formed two task forces, both made up of a mixture of seminary faculty and organizational leaders from a variety of types of institutions. One task force focused directly on the development of a theology of institutions, the other was designed to work on a model for theological reflection in the workplace. The two efforts became closely interrelated and both have profoundly influenced the work we are doing now.

COL: That's a fascinating history and I can see more clearly now the origin of some of the assumptions which undergird this work. What I'm not clear about is how you came to chose a relatively obscure theological concept like the threefold office of Christ as the point of departure? That theological tradition does not, in my experience, seem to connect easily with the faith-world of most lay people.

DB: As I indicated in talking about some of the insights that emerged from the original task force on economic institutions, religious language is problematic. We are faced with a real dilemma when we attempt to bridge the gap between the world of theology and the "secular" workplace. Which language system do you utilize to even begin the dialogue knowing full well that it puts those who are unfamiliar with it at a decided disadvantage. The choice also tends to construct a way of viewing reality which may completely misfire and not provide any real insight or illumination, after all.

COL: Clearly that's a risk we always have to take, but there are probably some ways we can guard against the more obvious pitfalls. Since you were attempting to create a theology of institutions, I can understand why the effort might need to begin using the language of theology. It doesn't explain, however, why you elected to focus on the three-fold office.

DB: We were influenced, I am sure, by Gabe Fackre who was a member of the task force and had been a significant theological resource to the work of the Center from the beginning. Earlier he had written an essay printed by the Center, Christ's Ministry And Ours in which he used the threefold office as a way to interpret and illumine the workplace ministry of Christian laity. But when the task force began meeting we actually looked at several different entry points and it was only after lengthy conversation that we all agreed the model of the threefold office seemed the most promising point of departure.

Gabe articulated a rationale for why the threefold office made sense. Among other reasons he suggested that:

1. For ecumenical Christianity, Christ's incarnation in ministry has been understood and interpreted in terms of the threefold work or office of Christ. So if one goal of this work is to engage the Church in thinking theologically about institutions and their ministry or service, there is already a significant body of work that can be addressed and an audience primed to listen.
2. Calvin used the threefold office to describe the nature and ministry of one institution, the Church. So here is a window of opportunity for thinking theologically about institutions. (The obvious critical question is: can we make a case for correlating theological insights about the church as an institution to so-called "secular" institutions?)
3. There is also a tradition and some writing, albeit limited in scope and attention, that took the Reformation tradition and its interpretation of the threefold office and applied it to the secular presence and ministry of Christ. This tradition goes back to the Heidelberg catechism on the three-fold ministry of the laity and currently is found in Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. So once again here was a possible foundation, that already had some standing and acceptance in ecumenical circles, on which we could build.
4. But perhaps the most compelling argument took its cue from Paul's Colossian letter and comes down to whether or not we are committed to try and think christologically about mission and ministry in the world. Do we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of creation in its entirety? And, if we do, what are the implications of that confession for our understanding of Christ's Lordship in the world of organizations?

COL: Mercy! Enough! I see now where you are taking your cues from the theological tradition. You still haven't convinced me that the concept of Christ's threefold office is the way to go however. My reservations have less to do with continuity with theological tradition and more to do with concerns for whether this particular tradition is both **accessible** and **relevant**.

My concern around **accessibility** relates to my strong sense that the notion of Christ's threefold office represents an emphasis that is largely unfamiliar to many of the essential participants on our ongoing conversation. Only those who bring significant theological training to the dialogue will find it useful. Most of my friends who are serious about their faith and fluent in its language give me blank stares when I mention the threefold

office. It's an obscure notion. If our hope in this work is to be reflecting theologically with people of faith whose expertise lies in their training and experience with organizations and institutions, don't we need to be concerned about joining the conversation from our end with images that are more familiar and accessible? For instance, you mentioned earlier the image of the Body of Christ. Why not that? So, that's my concern around accessibility.

My question around **relevance** has to do with whether a historical theological tradition like the three-fold office of Christ can really speak meaningfully to the complex realities of contemporary organizations? I am worried that this emphasis on the threefold office puts the whole weight of the dialogue on the side of theology and not on the side of organizational theory and practice.

I think I could be persuaded about this theological approach, if I could be sure that it isn't a force fit.

DB: Fair enough. Let me speak first to your second question—the question of relevance. Because I don't believe any of these arguments would have ultimately prevailed to keep us working on this tack over these years if, early on, we hadn't discovered some promising correlations between the threefold office and the life and nature of organizations.

Fairly early in the life of the Center's task force on a theology of institutions, I was re-reading some of the research carried on 10 years earlier in Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia where we had been trying to illumine the role of institutional change agents. I discovered that in the early '70's the MAP staff had identified three corporate values which, when held in creative tension, seemed to capture the essential nature of any institution. We defined them back then as:

Corporate Wholeness = Concern for the quality of life within the institution reflecting how well the institution meets the full range of human and material needs of those who constitute its work force.

Corporate Accountability = Concern for the way in which the institution attempts to serve the needs of the larger society through the services or products it provides.

Corporate Effectiveness = Concern for how well the institution stewards the human and material resources in its possession.

In MAP these three criteria served as a rather rough attempt to get at the dynamics of institutional decision-making and the issue of corporate responsibility. We had no idea back then that we might also be dealing with the content of the three fold office of Christ.

When the Center's task force examined this material ten years later they immediately began to make rough correlations between these three values and the three offices of Christ (eg. the prophetic office with corporate accountability, the priestly office with corporate wholeness and the royal office with corporate effectiveness).

Further, as we reflected back on Paul Sherwin's insights regarding a business as a "system of interdependent members that can thrive only when

all members are given equal emphasis” we sensed we were dealing with a dynamically integrated model for understanding and creatively resolving the legitimate and inevitable tensions that are present inside any organization. With all its limitations and imperfections I believe the three-fold office of Christ and its organizational correlations holds real promise for understanding the nature of organizations and what constitutes their faithful service. At least that is the principal assumption on which we are working and which we are attempting to refine and test.

COL: What you have shared raises a multiple of questions for me, but it also provokes some additional connections and points of correlation. For example, it made me think of Russell Ackoff’s writing on system’s theory. As you know, Ackoff is the father of operations research and one of the first contributors to the development of systems thinking. He once proposed the theorem “If you take a system and take it apart to identify its components, and then operate those components in such a way that every component behaves as well as it possibly can, there is one thing of which you can be sure....the system as a whole well not behave as well as it can. The counter-intuitive corollary is this: if you have a system that is behaving as well as it can, none of its parts will be.”

Ackoff’s theorem helped me grasp not only the interdependent nature of an organizational system, but the necessity of tension within the system as each part has to accommodate, hopefully creatively, the needs and perspectives of the other parts. As I understand what he is saying no one part can dictate how the other parts must respond without damage to the system as a whole. Therefore, my assumption is that the task of balancing the legitimate but competing interests of each of the parts of the system (whether they be different stakeholder groups or specific functions or offices within the organization) is what lies at the heart of institutional effectiveness.

DB: That certainly is counter-intuitive but I believe our experience confirms the truth of it. That is why we have postulated that institutional faithfulness may not result so much from attempting to solve a problem by searching for and implementing the “perfect” or morally right answer which fully satisfies the concerns and meets the interests of each office and its stakeholders. Rather, faithfulness may more likely be the outcome when we attempt to “see things whole” to use a phrase of Bob Greenleaf’s and work for a solution that respects and relates the needs and interests of each office to the other two. This will probably mean that the solution will not fully satisfy the legitimate needs of any one office (ie. “the parts will not be able to function as well as they possibly can”). But it does suggest that by creatively holding the interests of each office together and insisting that any ‘solution’ must not allow the interests of any one office to overwhelm and dominate, the total system (organization) and each of its parts will be better served and better able to serve.

COL: I hear you proposing that tension and conflict stand at the heart of faithfulness for an organization in that three basic values, needs, “offices”, or whatever we call them are by their very nature in tension or conflict with each other? Does the theological tradition around the threefold office of Christ acknowledge there is a tension within Him, as well?

DB: That's a great question and I don't know what the answer is. We should press Gabe on this. What I do know is that the history of the Jewish nation was filled with tension and conflict between the priests, prophets and kings. I also wonder if one couldn't interpret the story of the temptation of Jesus at the start of his ministry within the model of these three "offices"?

On a somewhat different tack, in our effort to relate the theological tradition of the three fold office to the way "secular" folk might think about and understand their organizations, I would like to add another triadic theory or model. Murray Bowen, who is reputed to be the father of systems theory as it pertains to the field of psychotherapy and family systems, has developed an insightful clinical theory based on his observations that the triangle, a three person emotional configuration, is the basic building block of any emotional system.

He contends that a two-person system is stable only as long as it is calm and not under stress. But when anxiety increases, a two-person system immediately involves a third person and becomes a triangle. He said, "*A Triangle is a natural way of being for people. It is not inaccurate to think of the triangle as a failure in a two-person relationship, but that is a narrow view of the larger relationship system. When anxiety is low and external conditions are ideal, the back and forth flow in a twosome can be calm and comfortable. One could refer to this as the ideal or the normal state for a two person relationship. However, the human situation does not remain ideal for long, even under the best conditions when both people are fairly stable. The two person relationship is unstable in that it has a low tolerance for anxiety and it is easily disturbed by emotional forces within the twosome and by relationship forces from the outside. When anxiety increases the emotional flow within a twosome intensifies and the relationship becomes uncomfortable. When the intensity reaches a certain level ...the twosome predictably involves a third person.*"

I'm not sure I am doing justice to his ideas, but what was striking to me in his theory is the conviction that the triangle is more stable and flexible than a twosome. It has a much higher tolerance for anxiety and is capable of handling a fair percentage of life's stresses.

COL: This poses an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, in our three-fold office model we seem to be saying that the three offices and their interests are likely to be in tension with each other and that faithfulness is marked by how well these conflicting interests are held in creative balance. But Bowen seems to be suggesting that the triangle is a stable answer to the basic instability of a dyad or twosome.

DB: I'm not sure that the two theories or models are necessarily incompatible. I think it is possible to acknowledge the inevitable tension that exists between three different ways of seeing a problem or an organization and, at the same time, believe that by holding these three perspectives in creative tension we are more likely to experience and produce a healthy system or organization.

COL: As you were sharing this I immediately thought of Buckminster Fuller, the architect and city planner, who believes that the triangle or pyramidal form of the triangle is the most stable of building forms and capable of carrying significant loads.

DB: Maybe that is what we are being compelled to understand; that the threefold office is ultimately stable and capable of carrying enormous loads (ie. the health and well-being of the organization and those it seeks to serve!).

COL: In our reflection on tension and conflict between the offices are we in danger of a fairly benign view of organizations? What about the truly demonic in organizational life; those institutions which intentionally set out to destroy and diminish however they may attempt to cloak or disguise the true intent of their action? How do we factor evil demonic organizations into our theory or even the evil that well-intentioned institutions perform?

DB: I think your question is right on target and we've got to deal with that reality if the model is to have any credibility. But in doing so I would plead that we might treat or seek to understand sinful and corrupt institutions in the same way theologically that we attempt to understand and minister to sinful and corrupt people. If Christ's reconciling and redeeming love carries the cosmic implications I believe are present in the Apostle Paul's theology, then I believe institutions are also under this mandate and included in this hopeful reality.

COL: Walter Wink can be an enormous resource to us at this point. His trilogy on the powers and principalities — particularly his third volume Engaging the Powers . Here he addresses at length the challenge of just this: the struggle to faithfully engage the Powers in their fallenness. His choice of the word **engaging** in the title was not a casual one. Originally he had planned to entitle the volume *Confronting the Powers* because, as the volume's subtitle suggests ("*Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination.*") he is concerned about the serious business of confronting demonic powers. Wink came instead to frame the challenge as that of "engaging" these Powers in their fallenness out of his conviction that our wrestling would be most faithful if it was formed deeply by an awareness that they were, in the first place, created good, and will, in the last place, be once again redeemed so that they resume their rightful place in God's created order.

In this spirit, while we may well feel compelled to resist the powers and principalities in their more evil or fallen expressions, it can never be with the goal of annihilating them. Rather the images of this resistance have more to do with intercession. Our intercessions against-and-on-behalf-of the fallen powers will include prayer ("*permitting God to act without violating human freedom*") as well as other, more activist interventions including nonviolent struggle, challenging existing policies or posing value-based alternatives, loving the enemy, exorcism, mediating, conversion and healing.

In all of this, however, Wink cautions us that we must act with an awareness that it is God who is the original intervener and intercessor. In all of this we are joining with God ... "*in a prayer that is already going on in us and in the world.*"

DB: Let me make sure I'm hearing you correctly. Wink is not saying that because God is active, we don't need to be, is he?

COL: No, not at all! What I understand him to be doing is to remind us that God has not left us clueless in this challenge of faithfully engaging our

institutions. Rather, in looking toward God as we search for clues about what the shape of our own faith interventions might be, we are made mindful of at least a couple of things. One is that the goal of our interventions as agents of change is not to destroy the Powers, but rather their conversion...of calling them back to their rightful role as servants of God's purposes in Creation. The other is that we have neither the first nor the last word. Rather, our role is perhaps more helpfully understood as that of offering intercessory words and deeds that open up space for God to act.

DB: The notion of interceding on behalf of organizations is compelling for me. It seems to fit our effort to develop a model or way of thinking and acting in organizations that is theologically informed and illumined. But it also leads to more questions. For instance, where does the life and ministry of Jesus fit into this way of thinking?

COL: In some ways, Jesus is a model of lived intercession...a life that radically submitted itself so as to create for God a dramatic opportunity to act in the world without violating human freedom. Jesus offers us vital, albeit sobering clues, about how to open up space for God to intervene in the world.

DB: I'm intrigued by what you or Wink are proposing. How does it connect to the threefold office of Christ?

COL: My sense of the threefold office is that it is the Church's attempt to theologically describe and interpret the shape and significance of Jesus' intercessory life and work. It thus becomes, in part, our reference point for understanding our roles as "organizational intercessors".

DB: I feel this is a really promising idea, but that we have only begun to scratch the surface. Since our time is up, where do you suggest we go in our next conversation?

COL: I'd really like to spend some time pursuing Wink's Biblical study of the "Powers" as it relates to organizations and to our group reflection process; the three "offices"; their field of influence and the nine strategic lenses for action.

DB: I agree that we need to continue to unearth the assumptions behind our model. Some things seem fairly clear and solid...like our belief that organizational health or faithfulness is related to the capacity to see things whole and creatively manage the tension between the interests of each office. But today's conversation makes me realize how much more work we need to do to bridge the gap between our theology and the organizational life of most Christians.

COL: Yes, and I would like us to press both Wink's work and that of the organizational theorist, Margaret Wheatley. Coming from very different backgrounds and perspectives, I think they are addressing some of the same issues and with remarkably similar assumptions at some key places.

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