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Myths About Spiritual Warfare

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Spiritual warfare is one of the most popular topics in theological discussion today. C. Peter Wagner wrote *Warfare Prayer* (Seattle: YWAM, 1990) in which he charges Christians to expel the so-called “territorial spirits” from their cities. This turns the task of evangelism into magical confrontation with demonic forces.

One of the most sensational approaches to the subject is a book written by Rebecca Brown, M.D. In *He Came to Set the Captives Free* (Chino, California: Chick, 1986) Dr. Brown chronicles the influences of the occult on evangelical churches. She represents the viewpoint that Christians must rebuke Satan and drive him out of their churches.

Neil Anderson has made a reputation for himself by writing about spiritual warfare. Among his books are *Victory Over the Darkness* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1990) and *Walking Through the Darkness* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life, 1991). It is Anderson's thesis that Christians are in constant combat with the Evil One. They must deal with him radically and dramatically.

From a pronounced Pentecostal viewpoint, Dean Sherman wrote *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian* (Seattle: YWAM, 1990). He focuses on the uses of the Lord's Prayer, the “binding and loosing” passage, and the importunate prayer of Luke 18:1-8. He believes that Christians should “take authority” over demons and deal with them.

Mark I. Bubeck wrote, from a dispensational viewpoint, *Overcoming the Adversary* (Chicago: Moody, 1984). Bubeck takes the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6:11-18 and turns it into a prayer formula. He urges the believer to pray the protection of the armor for each family member every day. Bubeck is remarkably free from the “magical” aspects of the current spiritual warfare debate.

One of the most refreshing additions to this discussion is John MacArthur's *How to Meet the Enemy* (Wheaton: Victor, 1992). MacArthur takes a solidly biblical and theological

approach to the issue. One finds him to be a voice of sanity rising above the babel of emotion and hysteria.

Stripping Away the Myths

It is the thesis of this article that much spiritual warfare is spurious. It is predicated upon nonbiblical and thus theologically weak premises. It is therefore our purpose to strip away some of the myths which surround spiritual warfare. By doing this we can expose true spiritual warfare, as it is reflected in the Scriptures.

Myth #1—Spiritual warfare is unreal and unhistorical in character. There is an idea abroad that spiritual warfare is so much Pentecostal hocus pocus. It is seen as yet another gimmick designed to dazzle the gullible and mesmerize the simple. A variant on this theme is the idea that spiritual warfare is limited to the apostolic age and thus is irrelevant to our time. In reality spiritual warfare is part and parcel of the Christian life, and to trivialize it defrauds believers.

The scriptural nature of this spiritual warfare is emphasized in Matthew Henry's commentary. In his fine treatise on Ephesians 6, the commentator states:

Spiritual strength and courage are very necessary for our spiritual warfare. Be strong in the Lord, either in His cause and for His sake or rather in His strength.... By the actings of faith, we must fetch in grace and help from heaven to enable us to do that which of ourselves we cannot do, in our Christian work and warfare.¹

Another witness to the perpetual nature of spiritual warfare is the great Puritan writer William Gurnall, who wrote the definitive work, *The Christian in Complete Armour*. The subtitle summarizes Gurnall's viewpoint:

The saints' war against the Devil, wherein a discovery is made of that grand enemy of God and his people, in his policies, power, seat of his empire, wickedness, and chief design he

hath against the saints; a magazine opened, from whence the Christian is furnished with spiritual arms for the battle, helped on with his armour, and taught use of his weapon; together with the happy issue of the whole war.

Spiritual warfare is as old as the Garden of Eden. Our model is found in the triumph of Christ during the hour of temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). From the dawn of creation to the dawn of this day, spiritual warfare has been a part of every believer's life. It cannot be relegated to history past. Nor can it be dismissed as the phantom of an excited mind.²

Myth #2—Spiritual warfare must be carried on in public in order to inspire the church and humiliate the Devil. Many charismatic and Pentecostal Christians appear to espouse the idea that spiritual warfare must be public in order to be valid and real. They make as obvious a show of spiritual warfare as possible, and the public nature of this is construed to be a validation of its reality. Alas, in many cases this is little more than mass hypnosis or mass suggestion. It is perpetrated to make a public display of "binding the strong man." Warning of the sensationalist nature of his confrontational approach, John MacArthur writes in *How to Meet the Enemy*:

God is not calling us to verbally assault demons. He is not calling us to become skilled in the things of Satan. He is calling us to be faithful to Him, like the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia were. Doing so will prevent us from falling into the trap of the other five churches. May God help us to be on the alert for Satan's attacks and help us to remember Christ's warnings.³

It is well to remember that Jesus Christ many times retreated into privacy for the most dramatic displays of His power against Satan. For instance, He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead before a very small, select company of family members. His transfiguration occurred on the mountain,

where He was accompanied by only the inner circle of His disciples. Even His temptation in the desert appears to be a very private battle with the Evil One.

John Mac Arthur quotes Peter Masters, pastor of London's Metropolitan Tabernacle. Masters asserts:

The trouble is that the exorcists have developed a confrontational mentality.... Instead of seeing the spiritual warfare as it is presented in the Bible, where the devil is fought with the weapons of prayer, preaching, witness, godly living, obedience to Scripture and faith in the promises, these would-be exorcists want to engage in hand-to-hand combat, sensing, seeing and hearing the powers of darkness and striking them with dramatic words of authority. Here the air is thick with concepts which change precariously between the superstitions of medieval Rome and the notions of Eastern, pagan religions.⁴

There is an ever-present danger implicit in the public rebuking of Satan and the real or imagined dialogue with demons. The danger is this: the supposed exorcist emerges as the one who controls the demon world. This is not biblical. The Scriptures are abundantly clear that only the Lord can subjugate the Evil One. This is the implicit teaching of Job 1. It is formed into an axiom in 1 John 4:4: "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

While public battle may be incredibly satisfying to the ego of the exorcist, it is also dangerous. It tends to draw attention to and ascribe glory to the person involved, rather than to the Lord who jealously guards His honor from all incursions.

Myth #3—Spiritual warfare can be waged only by an especially gifted person. It is assumed in our society that spiritual warfare is totally dependent upon the person waging it. Someone telephoned to ask: "Do you have a deliverance ministry?" Answer: No, I do not deliver people, but the Gospel I preach exalts the Lord who is the Deliverer.

Early on in our missionary career we encountered a rather

famous expert on the matter of the occult. He had written extensively in the field, and his main writings had been translated into English. Soon he was on the speakers circuit regaling American audiences with his dramatic victories over demonic forces. He held the earned doctorate from a major university, and he posed as something of a pseudo-scientist, a counselor in matters occult. Within a few years his career (one hesitates to call it a ministry) began to unravel. His immoral life became known. His speaking opportunities dwindled. His life ended in tragedy. He had equated a supposed gifting with the work of the Lord. Unhappily, he had deluded himself as well as many others.

A recent media report indicated that Pope John Paul II had earlier performed an exorcism. This lifted him to a new level of awe among the faithful, but it also imputed to him a power which is supposedly beyond us normal mortals. It is assumed that part of his spiritual charisma is the ability to exorcise evil spirits.

So fascinating is this occult activity that in France there were during the 1970s more fortune tellers than there were either Catholic priests or medical doctors. A similar comparison could have been drawn in Germany during the 1970s.⁵

The frequency of occult activity led to an erroneous conclusion. It is this: Since there are so many occult functionaries about, there must also be numerous Christians who are especially gifted in dealing with the occult. This led to the identification of and inordinate respect for people who pretended to a "deliverance ministry." The end result was a cadre of Christian "psychics" who used their supposed spiritual powers to duel with Satan's psychics.

The Scripture presents an entirely different view of spiritual power. Power resides first and foremost in the Lord (Matt. 28:18). It is mediated by Him and at His will. It is not franchised to Christians who hope to "make a name for themselves." The sad story of Simon in Acts 8:9-25 demonstrates this. Neither is

the apostolic power ever passed on to the church. The “signs and wonders” of the apostolic age were distinctive, not normative.

Myth #4—Spiritual warfare is seen in terms of a “power encounter.” The “signs and wonders” movement has described spiritual warfare as a power encounter. The Christian does “hand-to-hand” combat with the forces of evil. It is expected that believers will engage in a sort of spiritual arm wrestling with demons, and in this way force the demons to give ground and surrender their prey. The Scripture portrays spiritual warfare as a declaration of the truth of God’s Word. Demons are given no right of reply.

In Ephesians 6:17 the spiritual armor includes the “sword of the Spirit” which is the Word of God. It is not the believer’s task to debate the veracity of Scripture with Satan, or with any of his agents. The task of the believer is to proclaim the Word of God. The forces of evil have no right of response. It is theirs to either submit or perish.

This is not a power encounter. It is a truth encounter. We do not engage in a struggle whose outcome is in doubt. The believer declares the absolutely valid Word of God, and Satan must submit. Was it not Luther who said: “The Scripture is like a lion. It need not be defended. It must simply be turned loose.”

Again John MacArthur expresses well this essential principle. He denies the validity of power encounter, when he writes:

“Weapons” refers to instruments of war. But these weapons are special. They are not designed or manufactured by human intellect or ingenuity. Neither are they mystical weapons. They are divine weapons, effective at tearing down Satan’s massive strongholds—incredibly effective, for the verses [2 Cor. 10:3-5] picture an army moving against a city and tearing down everything in its path.⁶

What is God’s battle plan? Not a so-called power encounter.

Not zapping the demons on the road. It is simply this: Consistently trusting and applying what you know to be true about God to the issues of life.

Dr. Paul Hiebert, leading a seminar on “Missions and Spiritual Warfare” at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, frontally challenged the concept of “power encounter.” According to Professor Hiebert: “Evangelism is primary, not spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is peripheral.” In the current situation, we tend to confuse the phenomenology of demonism and power encounter with reality. Instead of operating from a theological basis, we engage in warfare with real or imagined demons. All the while, the gullible among us cheer and clap.⁷

Myth #5—Spiritual warfare must be visible and dramatic. This involves “slaying in the Spirit.” There is a school of thought which sees spiritual warfare in terms of “slaying in the Spirit.” Who of us has not seen the “evangelist” lay her hands on the waiting supplicant, only to have the subject keel over like a tornado-twisted tree? The implication is this: The evangelist has so much spiritual power that she or he can knock out the unsuspecting seeker. In the process the Devil is driven from that person.

The matter of slaying in the Spirit is treated infrequently and superficially by charismatic and Pentecostal writers. In all of the years of my study, I have found one thin book dealing with the subject.

On the other hand, there is enormous anecdotal evidence about slaying in the Spirit. Television evangelists are observed placing their hands on a seeker’s forehead. Immediately the seeker begins to fall backward, where an associate of the evangelist catches the falling person. Those who have experienced this remain incredulous. One friend said: “I was determined not to fall backward. However, as soon as she [the evangelist] placed her hands on my forehead I fell down.”

One of the original participants in the 1906 Azusa Street

Mission was Frank Bartelman. In describing the Azusa Street revival he wrote: "Suddenly the Spirit would fall upon the congregation.... God himself would give the altar call. Men would fall all over the house, like the slain in the battle."⁸

From the standpoint of the Pentecostal or charismatic evangelist, this slaying in the Spirit is a public, tangible proof of God's power flowing through them. The person who is slain in the Spirit perceives this as an act of submission to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this act is followed by glossolalia or healing. The authenticity of this experience is seldom challenged by the followers of the Pentecostal or charismatic viewpoint.

However, this appears to me to be another example of "Christian magic." It is again Paul Hiebert who helpfully contrasts true worship with Christian magic in the following table.⁹

Christian Worship	Magic
God-centered	Self-centered
Submission to the Lord	Control by a person
Relational	Mechanistic, formulaic
Service-oriented	Success-oriented
God the end; we the means	We the end; God the means

Slaying in the Spirit seems to be a matter of suggestion at best and deception at worst. Afterwards the person speaks of a remarkable experience, but there is not necessarily any change in spiritual attitude. Recently a woman was apparently healed from a prolonged bout with illness. (Whether psychosomatic or organic in nature, one is not quite sure.) She had been helped by a couple of visiting Pentecostal evangelists.

Some months later a professional woman asked her pastor, "How do you explain the healing J. has undergone?" Then the professional woman added: "She appears to be healed physically and maybe even psychically, but she is as spiritually immature as ever."

In truth, spiritual warfare divorced from strong theological and biblical bases is nothing more or less than magic. As such it is at home in the emotional realm of folk religion, in this case folk Christianity. It is as helpful and as spiritually significant as the phrase, "Bless you," when someone sneezes.

Myth #6—Spiritual warfare is personal. It drives demons from New Testament-style demoniacs. This is a far too simplistic view of spiritual warfare. It denies the pervasive nature of evil. It also disregards the presence of evil in the systems of society, such as government, educational institutions, and the media. It deals with individuals as if they are the sole focus of sin in our society and the sole arena of satanic work. It denies the pervasiveness of sin in society and its structures.

Mark Bubeck emphasizes the individualist aspect of spiritual warfare in his *Overcoming the Adversary*. He introduces the subject with this statement:

One reason for the increased overt activity of Satan in the lives of Christians is that until recently the subject of aggressive spiritual warfare has been largely neglected in evangelical circles.... This book encourages believers to use warfare prayer and other practical means to reach certain victory. Believers must personally avoid and diligently guard their families from any involvement in occult practices.¹⁰

It is a typically myopic view of the evangelical as well as the charismatic and Pentecostal that spiritual warfare is a personal encounter. If one can ferret out the demonized person and deal with him or her, one can deal with Satan's power in the world.

Unfortunately, satanic activity is much more complex than that. For instance 1 John 2:15-16 portrays Satan as targeting the individual believer through the avenue of lust. First John 5:18-21 demonstrates that Satan is at work in the cosmos at large. He also works through systems, not just individuals.

Satanic control of systems can be seen in the drug cartels, the Mafia, the homosexual community. The influence of the Evil One can also be seen in otherwise good systems, such as the corruption in government, the greed of big business, the secular humanism of the educational establishment, and the moral abyss of the media.

To confront Satan simplistically by chasing a demon on every twig is to miss the point. Satan is also at work in our society at large. It is the God-ordained role of the Christian church to challenge his dominance. One sees this in the work of Calvin at Geneva, the activism of Wesley and the Anglican Evangelicals (such as Wilberforce), and the social revolution unleashed by missionaries such as David Livingstone and William Carey.

Prerequisites for Spiritual Warfare

There are three prerequisites for spiritual warfare. It is insufficient for us to challenge the Pentecostal/charismatic/third wave approach to spiritual warfare. It is flippant for us to expose the myths upon which contemporary spiritual warfare is based. Instead, it is essential that to prepare for battle with the forces of evil in a serious way:

1. Prayer must become a significant activity of our lives.

It is essential that we live in dependence upon the Lord and in acquiescence to His will. It is important for us to engage in prayer as a means of shaping our wills to the will of God. It is no mistake that the exhortation to prayer in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18) is appended to the Pauline explication of spiritual warfare (Eph. 6: 10-17).

In Ephesians 6: 18, we are challenged to “pray in the Spirit.” John MacArthur interprets that verse helpfully: “That means making your own prayers consistent with the mind and the will of the Spirit.” This presupposes that we are filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

Such prayer is not directed at demons or Satan, viz., “I

rebuke you, Satan.” No, these prayers are aimed at the expansion of God’s glorious kingdom and the exaltation of His name. Here is an age-old Puritan prayer:

I bless thee that the issue of the battle between thyself and Satan has never been uncertain, and will end in victory. Calvary broke the dragon’s head, and I contend with a vanquished foe, who with all his subtlety and strength has already been overcome. When I feel the serpent at my heel, may I remember him whose heel was bruised, but who, when bruised, broke the devil’s head. My soul with inward joy extols the mighty conqueror. Heal me of any wounds received in the great conflict; if I have gathered defilement, if my faith has suffered damage, if my hope is less than bright, if my love is not fervent, if some creature-comfort occupies my heart, if my soul sinks under the pressure of the fight.

O thou whose every promise is balm, every touch life, draw near to thy weary warrior, refresh me, that I may rise again to wage the strife, and never tire until my enemy is trodden down. Give me such fellowship with thee that I may defy Satan, unbelief, the flesh, the world, with delight that comes not from a creature, and which a creature cannot mar. Give me a drought of the eternal fountain that lieth in thy immutable, everlasting love and decree.

Then shall my hand never weaken, my feet never stumble, my sword never rest, my shield never rust, my helmet never shatter, my breastplate never fall, as my strength rests in the power of thy might.¹¹

2. Saturation with the Scripture is essential. A superficial study of the Scriptures is insufficient for spiritual warfare. It is important that our very beings are saturated with the thought processes of Holy Writ. Only then can we detect the deviations in our society as being from the Evil One. Only then can we apply Scripture to the issues of spiritual warfare as the Lord

did in Matthew 4:1-11.

In his helpful discussion of spiritual warfare, Professor Paul Hiebert moved through three stages. First, he discussed the phenomenology of spiritual warfare. Here he dealt with the spurious and wild claims advanced by so-called demonized people. He openly studied all the phenomena which present themselves in this heated discussion.

Second, he dealt with the ontology of the situation. Here he laid a firm theological basis for spiritual warfare. He reminded the seminar participants of the nature of the Lord. He underlined the premise that we are confronting satanic lies with scriptural truth. We are not jousting with demons, real or imagined. The immensity of God and the infinitude of His power are our basis. The outcome of the battle is not in doubt. We need not be timid.

Third, Hiebert dealt with the missiological aspects of spiritual warfare. Here he discussed the frequency of witchcraft, and he proposed a biblical approach to it. Then he discussed possession and how to confront this phenomenon. In each case the basis was the truth of Scripture, not a matching of wits and might with the demons. Above all, it is essential to exercise biblical discernment, which takes the Scriptures as the sole criterion of truth.¹²

Again, John MacArthur captures this significant truth:

The only way you will know victory in the Christian life is by daily studying the principles of God's Word. That way you'll be ready to apply them whenever the world, the flesh, and the devil choose to attack. That means you must saturate your mind with God's Word. The reason so many Christians fall to temptation is they just don't know how Scripture deals with what's troubling them.¹³

3. Confront satanic influence radically with the truth of God's Word. We are not engaging in a power encounter, but rather a truth encounter. It is essential that we apply the truth

of God's Word to the evil in our society and in individual lives. True spiritual warfare occurs most usually in the act of preaching, where the work of Satan is subjected to the scalding heat of the Spirit-inspired Word.

When asked about his counseling ministry, a friend replied: "I do 90 percent of my counseling from the pulpit." At first blush, I found this answer to be simplistic, naive. Later I comprehended its truth. When the whole counsel of God is taught faithfully, the listener is equipped to deal with the crises in his life.

At the risk of similar naivete and simplicity, when the Word of God is faithfully preached spiritual warfare occurs. The eternal, inerrant, inspired Scriptures are a thorough affront to Satan and all of his forces. Nothing contributes more to Satan's defeat than the public exposure of his work. This may be the work of Satan in individual lives or in the systems of society.

It is crucial to our comprehension of spiritual warfare to remember the great apostolic axiom: "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Endnotes

- 1 Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McClellan, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), 6: 718.
- 2 William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, 8th ed. 1827, 3 vols.
- 3 John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992), 58.
- 4 Peter Masters, *The Healing Epidemic* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1988), pp. 62, 82-84, as quoted in John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy*, 91.
- 5 Wayne A. Detzler, *The Changing Church in Europe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1979, 15.
- 6 John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy*, 69, 119.
- 7 Paul Hiebert, "Missions and Spiritual Warfare." Seminar presented at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New

Haven, Connecticut, November 30-December 4, 1992. See also Wayne Detzler, *Spiritual Warfare: Power Encounter or Truth Encounter?* (Meriden, Connecticut: Privately Published, 1993). Note: Inasmuch as Satan is a liar by his very nature (John 8:44), it is imperative that we do not accept his words at face value. It is not Satan but the Scripture which forms our understanding of the demonic forces in our world.

- 8 Frank Bartelman, *Azusa Street*, pp. 59-60, as cited in R. G. Robins, "Pentecostal Movement" (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 887.
- 9 Paul Hiebert, "Missions and Spiritual Warfare."
- 10 Mark I. Bubeck, *Overcoming the Adversary* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), pp. 14-15.
- 11 *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Quotations*, edited by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 181, as cited in John MacArthur, 163-67.
- 12 Paul Hiebert, "Missions and Spiritual Warfare."
- 13 John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy*, 149.

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