

Spiritual Warfare and Evangelism

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Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, a novel describing the influence of demons on a fictional town, quickly popularized the topic of spiritual warfare in North America after its publication in 1986. Somewhat contemporaneous with the publication of Peretti's works, C. Peter Wagner (Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary) began to research and write about the worldwide prayer movement. His interest in prayer led him to become a leader of the growing spiritual warfare movement.¹

It was evident by 1989 (with the establishment of a "Spiritual Warfare Track" under the direction of Charles Kraft at Lausanne II in Manila) that the spiritual warfare movement had gained an official hearing from evangelical leaders in addition to its growing popular constituency.² The establishment of the A.D. 2000 United Prayer Track and the Spiritual Warfare Network under Wagner's leadership further strengthened the movement.

Conferences on spiritual warfare are held throughout the country. No fewer than 100 books about spiritual warfare have been published since 1990. Like Peretti's novels, some of these works have had popular appeal.³ Clearly, the topic of spiritual warfare has captured interest on this continent.

The Spiritual Warfare Movement and Evangelism

The message of warfare proponents is clear: spiritual warfare is a fact of the Christian life, and to ignore that truth is to invite defeat at the hands of demonic

powers.

Indeed, these leaders contend that not to prepare for spiritual warfare is to be ill equipped for evangelism and discipleship in the twenty-first century. Therefore, proponents of spiritual warfare are quite passionate about the urgency of their message.

Forceful warnings and loud battle cries like the following echo throughout much of warfare literature:

We are in a holy war for the souls of men and women. We are wrestling in heavenly places against an enemy who is ruthless in his desire to steal, kill and destroy. . . . And one of his greatest weapons is passivity on the part of the believers. While we have been busy in the churches, he has been carefully instituting his rule in the nations of the world.⁴

This call to recognize the spiritual battle in evangelism pre-dates the current fascination with spiritual warfare. For example, the Lausanne Covenant enacted at the 1974 Congress for World Evangelization clearly articulated this spiritual struggle in an article entitled "Spiritual Conflict":

We believe that we are engaged in constant spiritual warfare with the principalities and powers of evil who are seeking to overthrow the Church and to frustrate its task of world evangelization. We know our need to equip ourselves with God's armor and to fight this battle with the spiritual weapons of truth and prayer.⁵

In 1984 nearly 100 Christian leaders at the International Prayer Assembly for

World Evangelization issued a call for prayer that “both empowers our witness and opens Satan-blinded unbelievers to seek and desire the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour.”⁶ Speaking at the same conference, Harold Lindsell explicitly identified the enemy of both the church and world evangelization:

We are engaged in a great battle. We need to understand who the enemy is and how he functions. Our warfare is essentially spiritual and is waged against Satan himself. He is known as the devil and the prince of this world.⁷

Now, many leaders of the spiritual warfare movement assert that spiritual warfare strategies are critical tools for evangelism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To illustrate, Tom White, seminar leader at the 1994 North American Congress for Itinerant Evangelists, called on evangelists to be prepared for warfare:

The evangelists of the 1990s and beyond must be equipped in four areas. First, the cutting-edge worker must think biblically, not just culturally. We must accept the supernatural worldview that depicts a cosmic conflict between God and his angels, Satan and his demons, with humankind caught in between. . . . Second, the contemporary kingdom evangelist must realize that he or she will become a target of the enemy’s opposition. We must learn better to detect when we come under supernatural attack, and how to deal with this with God’s armor and mighty weapons. . . . Third, we need to get far better at discerning and dealing with the demonic “birds of the air” that steal away the precious seed of the word (Mt. 13:19). We need instruction on how to penetrate the veil of supernatural deception and set captives free. . . . And fourth, the contemporary evangelist must better understand that the powers of

darkness employ specific schemes among particular people and places on earth.⁸

Wagner, moreover, argues that the primary weapon for world evangelization is warfare prayer. He states that his own interest in spiritual warfare “is directly proportional to its effectiveness in enhancing evangelism.”⁹ It is not surprising, then, that “The Philosophy of Prayer for World Evangelization” adopted by the A.D. 2000 United Prayer Track emphasizes the spiritual battle involved in evangelism:

Two fundamental biblical premises underlie the various approaches to spiritual warfare as it applies to evangelizing the lost. They can best be stated by quoting relevant biblical texts: (1) The devil directly and explicitly attempts to obstruct the evangelization of the lost: “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Cor. 4:3-4, NKJV). (2) Our weapons designed by God to help remove these obstructions to evangelism are spiritual weapons. “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.” (2 Cor. 10:4-5, NKJV).¹⁰

One is hard pressed to deny the commitment of key leaders in the spiritual warfare movement to the task of evangelism. Nevertheless, in spite of its popularity and its undeniable commitment to evangelism, we should subject this movement to careful scrutiny. This article offers an analysis and critique, with particular attention to the relationship between spiritual warfare and evange-

lism, and proposes a strategy for overcoming the spiritual battles inherent in evangelism.

Spiritual Battles in Evangelism

In his study of American evangelism, Darius Salter concludes that “evangelism at its best is not defined as an activity but as a force for good, invading and beating back the powers of evil.”¹¹ Though Salter’s understanding of evangelism and the “powers of evil” would likely differ somewhat from spiritual warfare proponents, he does recognize a significant truth: evangelism involves invading enemy territory.

Consider, for example, the basic components of evangelism. As noted in the A.D. 2000 statement, unbelievers are blinded by the “god of this age” (2 Cor 4:3-4). God calls the evangelist to proclaim the good news that He has “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col 1:13). He uses believers as His instruments to reach unbelievers “so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

The persons we seek to reach are in bondage. We proclaim a message of liberation and freedom. The enemy counters, striving to hold his captives in chains. Though God has already defeated Satan and secured salvation for His own through the cross (Col 2:15), the battle is no less real. Thus concludes Samuel Wilson:

We are forced, given the nature of evangelism and spiritual struggle associated with it, to military metaphor. . . . This is the language of scripture, because it is the reality of our engagement with real spiritual enemies.¹²

This recognition that evangelism involves a spiritual battle is perhaps the most significant insight offered by writers in the spiritual warfare movement. Evangelism is more than just a strategy, technique, or program; rather, it is taking the gospel into the kingdom of darkness. To evangelize is to march into a spiritual battle.

Foundational to this understanding of evangelism is an awareness that evangelism is fruitless without God’s power. Apart from the supernatural work of God’s grace countering the enemy’s hold on non-believers, evangelism produces no converts. This is a needed reminder, particularly when contemporary evangelism and church growth strategies are often more anthropocentric than theocentric in method and in focus.

How, then, does the enemy strive to hinder evangelism? Tom White asserts that Satan’s forces work on two fronts: They “deceive and divert people from salvation in Jesus,” and they “harass and hinder Christians through enticement to sin and exploitation of weaknesses.”¹³ At one level, the enemy fights to maintain control over unbelievers; at another level, he seeks to weaken a believer’s witness.

Satan as the Opponent of Believers

Scripture affirms that Satan continues to attack persons who become believers.¹⁴ For example, Jesus warned Peter that Satan demanded permission to “sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31). Peter himself later warned believers, “Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8).

The apostle Paul, who himself experienced “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” (2 Cor 12:7), likewise admon-

ished believers to “put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph 6:11). James, too, called believers to resist the devil, presupposing that the enemy would attack (Jas 4:7). If Satan does not attack believers, such recurrent warnings would seem irrelevant and unnecessary.

Though the enemy’s schemes against believers are many, some are obvious. Satan entices believers with temptation, seeking to lure them into patterns of their former walk (Eph 4:17-32). After influencing believers to sin, he then heaps accusations on them; the tempter quickly becomes the accuser (Rev 12:10).

His strategy—to “beat up on sinners” who fail to comprehend the meaning of real grace¹⁵—often leads to a cycle of defeat and discouragement. As a result, ineffective, defeated believers carry little influence with non-believers who are held in the kingdom of darkness (Col 1:13).

Moreover, Satan endeavors to cultivate strife among believers, thereby weakening the church’s united witness (see John 17:20-21). The challenge of world evangelization is so immense that God-centered, Bible-believing Christians must work together to accomplish our task. The enemy, however, will do all he can to sow seeds of discord among believers. In the words of the Puritan, William Gurnall, “we by our mutual strifes give the devil a staff to beat us with; he cannot well work without fire, and therefore blows up these coals of contention.”¹⁶ Divided believers offer little hope to an already fractured world.

Lewis Sperry Chafer helps us understand one of Satan’s purposes in attacking believers:

The believer is also the object of Satanic attack because of the fact that unto the child of God is committed the great ministry of reconciliation; that by his testimony both in life and word, and by his prayers, the facts of redemption may be given to the world. If Satan can cripple the believer’s service he accomplishes much in resisting the present purpose of God. No other explanation is adequate for the dark pages of church history, the appalling failure of the church in world-wide evangelism, or her present sectarian divisions and selfish indifference.¹⁷

Chafer’s conclusion that “no other explanation” (other than satanic attack) adequately explains the church’s failures is perhaps overstated, but his point remains valid. One reason that Satan attacks believers is to weaken their testimony in life and word. When believers fail under spiritual attack, the witness of God’s people is hindered.

For this reason, the enemy most carefully aims his arrows at believers whose lives are God-honoring. Charles Spurgeon—himself an evangelist extraordinaire—described this reality with these words: “The nearer you live to God, the more you can expect Satan’s opposition. There is sure to be contention wherever the harvest is plenteous and where the farmer’s toil is well rewarded.”¹⁸

Given the reality of Satanic attack, the church must prepare its members for spiritual warfare. Evangelism itself invites a response from the enemy, and the evangelist who is improperly armed will likely suffer spiritual defeat. One goal of this article, therefore, is to offer a strategy for preparing believers for the battle.

Satan as the Opponent of Unbelievers

In his thorough study of Satan and

demons, Sidney H. T. Page indicates that two Pauline passages describe Satan's activities toward unbelievers—2 Corinthians 4:4 and Ephesians 2:2.¹⁹ The former verse, according to warfare advocates, describes Satan's primary strategy against unbelievers: "the god of this world" has blinded their minds.

Also called the "prince of this world" (John 12:31) and "prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2), Satan does whatever he can to keep unbelievers in darkness. The unbeliever is by no means guiltless—"for the blindness spoken of is a consequence of unbelief"²⁰—but the darkness is deepened by the enemy's efforts to maintain control. He himself is already defeated, but he still "has the strength to besiege human minds and to incite them to embrace and exalt evil rather than God."²¹

Satan's strategies for keeping unbelievers blinded are several. The enemy provides the lies to which unbelievers cling, such as "I'm good enough," or "I can always wait until tomorrow to follow God."²² He makes sin attractive and alluring, convincing the unbeliever that following God will mean a loss of pleasure. He snatches away the Word of God before it takes root in an unbeliever's heart (see Matt 13:3-9, 18-23).

More specifically, Satan blinds unbelievers to the gospel by promoting distorted views of the gospel itself. Clinton Arnold recognizes that Paul originally used the term "strongholds" (a term commonly misused in spiritual warfare circles) to denote Satan's raising of "dangerous and wrong ideas about Jesus and his gospel" (see 2 Cor 10:4).

False teachers, disguised as "apostles of Christ" (2 Cor 11:13), proclaimed "another Jesus whom we have not preached" (11:4). In response, Paul called

the Corinthians to battle with spiritual weapons against the strongholds of false ideas (10:4). He "wanted them to commit themselves afresh to the true gospel . . . the gospel of the Christ."²³

A general principle may, therefore, be derived from the text: Satan seeks to promote false teachings to direct attention away from Christ and to weaken the message of the gospel. Ultimately, strongholds of false teachings (whether from inside or outside of the church) are designed to keep unbelievers in bondage. The words of J. Dwight Pentecost clearly emphasize this point:

Satan, of course, would rather not have to do this work of taking away the seed that has been sown. He would rather so control the one who is doing the preaching that something *other than the good seed of the Word of God* is proclaimed.²⁴

Particularly in the increasingly pluralistic landscape of North American religion, Satan seeks to undermine the biblical truth that exclusive, personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to God.²⁵ Exclusivity of salvation in Christ is largely rejected, with a growing number of American adults believing that "all good persons" will go to heaven whether or not they know Jesus Christ as Savior.²⁶ God's "radical love" and His "boundless generosity" have been widely interpreted to indicate that a personal faith response to Christ is no longer necessary for salvation.²⁷

Evangelism becomes largely unnecessary if we believe and teach that a plurality of routes leads to God. While the church buys the lies of pluralism and inclusivism, Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14) and lulls unbelievers into a false sense of spiritual security.

Perhaps a brief summary is in order here. The enemy schemes against believers, seeking to discourage and defeat them so their message of life and joy lacks credibility. At the same time, he seeks to keep unbelievers blinded to the gospel, thus holding them in bondage. Any effective strategy for evangelism must take these spiritual realities into consideration.

A Proposed Strategy for Winning the Spiritual Battles in Evangelism: The Warfare Message and Guidelines of Ephesians

Clinton Arnold, in his book *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, states that the book of Ephesians includes proportionately more “power terminology” than any other New Testament book.²⁸ He further contends that the emphasis on the “powers” reflects a prevalent interest in religious powers in western Asia Minor in the first century.

Believers in that region needed “encouragement in their ongoing struggles with these pernicious spirit-forces,”²⁹ and the letter of Ephesians provided that encouragement and instruction. It is primarily for this reason that I turn to Ephesians as the foundation for a proposed spiritual warfare strategy.

Commentator Andrew Lincoln argues that the armor/warfare passage in Ephesians (6:10-17) serves as a *peroratio* to the book; that is, it “sums up some of the broad themes of the letter in effective fashion under new imagery.”³⁰ Additionally, the *peroratio* not only summarized the book, but it did so in a way that would encourage the hearers to act on what they had heard.³¹

Hence, Paul not only warns the hearers about the conflict but also calls them to fight the battle by following the earlier

teachings of the book. Those teachings address two broad emphases related to spiritual warfare: (1) the theological foundations undergirding victory in warfare, and (2) the practical guidelines for experiencing that victory.

Theological Premises for Warfare

The first three chapters of Ephesians lay the theological foundations for the remainder of the book. The practical exhortations of the second section of the book are extensive, but those ethical instructions are subordinated to the theological themes of the first section.³² Three theological premises specifically pertinent to spiritual warfare are addressed here.

The Centrality of God

In his analysis of the themes of Ephesians, W. O. Carver argued, “The very first fact to impress the reader, and the most powerful impression as he continues, is that *the entire book starts and proceeds from the God standpoint.*”³³ God is, in fact, “the subject of all the action, the source of all the experience” in the epistle.³⁴

It is God who “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4), and in whom we have redemption (1:7). He made alive “those who were dead in [their] transgressions” (2:5). It is He who reconciled believers to Himself in Christ (2:14-16).

Further, He is “over all and through all and in all” (4:6). God in Christ gave Himself for the Church (5:25), and it is *He whose armor protects the believer from the enemy* (6:11). To know God and to realize that the armor is *His* armor is to understand that we gain spiritual victory *only* through Him.

God is the warrior who led His people

across the Red Sea (Exod 15:3). David fought the Philistine giant not with a sword and a javelin, but in the name of the Lord whose battle it was (1 Sam 17:45-47). Jehaziel likewise assured Jehoshaphat of God's presence in the midst of battle with these words: "Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's" (2 Chron 20:15).

God is our shield (Gen 15:1, Ps 28:7), and it is He who chose to wear the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation (Isa 59:17). We face a real enemy in spiritual battles, but we are armed in the armor of a God who is "greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Thus, any warfare strategy (or evangelism strategy, for that matter) that fails to keep God central fails to maintain biblical fidelity.

Here, a critique of current warfare approaches that focus on discovering and naming demons is in order. To state the point simply, seeking and naming demons in order to overcome them misses the focus of biblical spiritual warfare. As Jessie Penn-Lewis recognized in her classic treatise, *War on the Saints*, "counterfeiting the divine" is Satan's first tool for deceiving believers.³⁵ Consequently, the primary task of the spiritual warrior is *not* to know Satan well—it is to know God so intimately that Satan's counterfeit becomes obvious in comparison.

The Sinfulness of Humanity

Most, if not all, warfare advocates affirm humanity's need for salvation. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Satan's blinding of unbelievers risks neglecting the truth that human beings are fallen by nature and by choice (Eph 2:2-3). If demonic forces are accepted as the cause of all wrong, human responsibility and the

sins of the flesh (Eph 2:3) are ignored. Strategies for breaking the powers may, then, wrongly take precedence over evangelizing lost people in need of a Savior.

To counter this faulty tendency, the doctrinal truth of the sinfulness of humanity must be more clearly asserted. Though their argument addresses believers, Thomas Ice and Robert Dean express this perspective well:

What gives these two enemies [Satan and the world] an opportunity to operate in the believer's life is the enemy that is in each of us. Satan (and demons) can tempt the Christian, and the world-system can provide philosophies and ideas which give a rationale for sin, but it is the individual who makes the choices, yields to the temptation, or utilizes the philosophy in order to justify his sinful action.³⁶

With respect to evangelism and spiritual warfare, maintaining this perspective yields at least two results. First, it clearly holds the human being rather than Satan responsible for sin. Hence, *conversion* rather than deliverance remains the necessary focus. In fact, deliverance without conversion invites a worse situation than the first (see Matt 12:43-45).

Second, recognizing one's sinfulness fosters appreciation for God's grace as the only true source of victory over one's sinful nature. The good news of Christ is the answer to humanity's need. It is the key that lifts the veil of blindness from non-believers. Sharing that good news, therefore, is "the primary aggressive action the Christian is called to take" in spiritual warfare.³⁷

The Believer's Position in Christ

God as the focal point of Ephesians is further illustrated in the epistle's empha-

sis on the exalted Christ. Jesus is the Head of the Church (5:23). He is seated at God's right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (1:20-21). All things are subject to Him (1:22). Christ is, in fact, "juxtaposed to the 'powers' and declared to be superior to them."³⁸

Believers also experience the blessings of the exalted Christ. We now have new life as a result of Christ's resurrection power (2:4-6), and we have been "raised up" with Him and "seated with Him" in heavenly places (2:6).

In Christ, believers share His victory over the powers that was accomplished at the cross (Col 2:15). It is from this position in Christ that we live out our calling in Christ. It is from this position of victory that we face Satan. A legitimate strategy for spiritual warfare must, therefore, emphasize the already-achieved victory more than the ongoing battle. It must offer strength for battle in the believer's identity in Christ.

In sum, Ephesians focuses on God and the exalted Christ rather than the principalities and powers. The power of God is more significant than the power of the enemy. Is it surprising, then, that the first section of Ephesians ends with a doxology proclaiming God's power to do all things (Eph 3:20-21)?

Practical Applications in Warfare

How that power is exhibited through believers is the focus of the second section of the book of Ephesians. The emphasis shifts from the theological to the practical, as Ralph Martin indicates:

More simply, from the rarefied heights of "the heavenly places" (lit., "the heavenlies," 1:20; 2:6) the thought comes down to the earthlies of daily experience and communal living in the Greco-Roman society in

which the Pauline churches were set.³⁹

The last three chapters of Ephesians flesh out the believer's already-secured victory in Christ. Against the contextual backdrop of first-century Asia Minor, these exhortations served as both a call for and a description of a life that is victorious over the evil powers. The victorious life as described in Ephesians is characterized by church unity, personal holiness, and Christian relationships.

Unity in the Church

As David Dockery notes in his study of Ephesians, "the call for unity among God's people takes high priority in the Scriptures."⁴⁰ That emphasis on unity reflects the theological truths that there is but one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph 4:4-6). Furthermore, Christ has reconciled Jew and Gentile unto Himself in one body (2:11-18).

At the same time, unity in the church prevents Satan from gaining a foothold, as John Calvin indicated in this sermon on Ephesians 4:1-5:

For we know that when any fire of strife is kindled, every man would have his enemies drowned in the bottom of hell. . . . Therefore if we desire to be one (as we must if we would be God's children) let us take good heed that Satan stirs up no conflicts among us, and let us be quiet and endeavor to prevent troubles where we see any likelihood of them.⁴¹

In fact, Calvin's message implies an important warfare truth. Those traits that characterize a victorious life are also Satan's targets—while concurrently being the very strengths with which believers counter the enemy.

In this example, legitimate Christian unity indicates that victory is occurring. That very unity also serves as a shield against further darts of Satan. At the same time, however, unity so threatens Satan that he continues to target the church to divide it. The implication for spiritual warfare is significant: The believer's weapons, by which we threaten Satan, are, at the same time, the targets of Satan's attack. Therefore, believers must continually be on guard against division, joining together and walking in grace and holiness as a "precious remedy against Satan's devices."⁴²

Holiness in Lifestyle

If one grants Arnold's thesis that the converts in Ephesus struggled with the lure of their pagan past, Ephesians 4:17-5:20 is a strong exhortation against falling into previous sinful patterns.⁴³ Those old patterns are marked by, among other sins, callousness, sensuality, greed, deceit, anger, theft, bitterness, immorality, coarse jesting, and drunkenness.

The new life is characterized by righteousness, truth, wholesome speaking, kindness, thanksgiving, and a forgiving spirit (4:17-5:20). Believers, who have been given a new nature in grace, need not suffer defeat at the hands of the old self (4:20-24). In fact, righteous persons not only refrain from "deeds of darkness," but they also expose and denounce those deeds (5:11-12).

Satan thereby loses the warfare battle when believers live holy lives. Indeed, one scholar has suggested that "the new way of life is the ultimate weapon in spiritual warfare."⁴⁴ Whether or not the new life is the "ultimate" weapon is debatable, but this emphasis remains an important one. Satan is more alarmed by holy living than

he is by spiritual warfare techniques and strategies.

Regrettably, too few spiritual warfare writers address the need for personal holiness. Warfare strategies abound, but little attention is given to the life of the warrior. This lack of attention could lead to disaster (see further our discussion of Acts 19:11-20 below).

Christlikeness in relationships

Satan's desire to disrupt relationships is evident as early as Genesis 3, where Adam blamed Eve for his sin (Gen 3:12). A. Scott Moreau's analysis of Satan's plan is perceptive:

While Satan's goal is our literal destruction, . . . he moves toward that goal by figuratively murdering, or destroying our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. He takes pleasure in broken relationships marked by betrayal, abuse, bullying, apathy, jealousy, and emotional baggage. He takes pleasure in people who are so driven by hurt, anger, and bitterness that these emotions become the foundation for their relationships with others. Why else would he be interested in two small human beings in the Garden of Eden?⁴⁵

In opposition to Satan's plan and in accordance with God's design, Paul asserted that all relationships are to be subject to Christ (Eph 5:21-6:9). Family (husband/wife, parent/child) and work (master/slave) relationships are to be governed by submission, sacrifice, nurture, and respect—a "revolutionary new footing" in Paul's world.⁴⁶

Strong Christian relationships are a source of strength against Satan, while they simultaneously substantiate the believers' victory in Christ. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Satan contin-

ues to “champion the disruption of relationships.”⁴⁷

**The Peroratio:
Putting on the Armor**

As previously indicated, Ephesians 6:10-20 serves as a *peroratio* that summarizes the book while motivating the hearers to action. On one hand, the armor is God’s armor (Eph 6:11): it is the believer’s position in Christ that provides the pro-

tection of salvation, righteousness, and truth. On the other hand, Paul’s admonition also assumes that the weapons must be exercised. Putting on the armor involves accepting one’s identity in Christ *and* then living obediently out of that identity.⁴⁸

This process of warfare is illustrated in the following chart that attempts to place the Ephesians 6 warfare passage in the overall context of the book:⁴⁹

	CHAPTERS 1-3	CHAPTERS 4-6
PURPOSE:	Theology / Beliefs: “We in Christ.”	Praxis / Behavior: “Christ in us.”
FOCUS:	The work of God: position and privileges of the believer.	The walk of the Christian: practice and responsibilities of the believer.
THEME:	You are in Christ.	Walk worthy of your calling.
APPLICATIONS:	Election in Christ, you have been made alive, created for good works, given His power and authority, and united in His Church.	From your position in Christ, show humility, patience, and gentleness in the church, in your personal life, in your relationships.
WARNING / PREPARATION:	Theologically and positionally, your victory is secure in Christ. Practically, the battle continues. Prepare for and fight the spiritual battle by putting on the armor of God.	

Figure 1. The Outline of Ephesians

How, then, does “putting on the armor” relate to evangelism? The essence of putting on the armor is living daily in truth, righteousness, faith, and hope, while always being ready to proclaim the gospel of peace found in the Word. Moreover, daily putting on and utilizing the armor is an essential element of the believer’s process of becoming like Jesus—the goal of biblical discipleship.⁵⁰

Putting on the armor includes developing character, meeting ethical demands, exhibiting personal holiness, preparing for witnessing, studying the Bible, and focusing on prayer. This process is not about mystical prayer that magically applies the weaponry to believers’ lives each day. Rather, it is about discipleship and spiritual growth that affect all of one’s life. Wearing the armor is about *daily living* as a follower of Christ.

An effective evangelism strategy, therefore, must include an uncompromising commitment to discipleship for both the evangelist and the new convert. The evangelist who has not been disciplined will be unprepared for the attacks that come as he strikes against the kingdom of darkness. He will battle for only so long before the enemy aims at an unarmed vulnerability.

Likewise, the new believer who is not disciplined will not be ready for such attacks as doubt, temptation, and discouragement. This newborn believer will, in fact, be a babe in Christ sent into the war unarmed. Defeat is almost inevitable unless the church fulfills its task of making disciples (Matt 28:18-20).

Praying Evangelistically

Paul concludes the book of Ephesians with a request for believers to pray for one another and for his evangelistic endeavors

(Eph 6:18-20). Though Paul likely did not intend prayer to be a piece of the armor of God, the sense of urgency noted in verses 18-20 ties his request to the battle indicated in 6:11-12. The believers were to “be on the alert,” praying with *all* prayer at *all* times with *all* perseverance and petition for *all* the saints (v. 18).

Paul’s request for boldness also implies his recognition that evangelism would not be an easy task. Indeed, both Ephesians and Colossians—letters written to a culture dominated by the powers—include a request from Paul for continued prayer support.

Pray for an Open Door to Share the Gospel (Col 4:2-3)

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul requested the believers to pray that “God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ” (Col 4:3). Because he was in prison at the time (Col 4:18), it is possible that Paul desired a release from prison in order to preach the gospel. More likely, as Peter O’Brien indicates, Paul “did not regard imprisonment as a serious interruption of his missionary work.”⁵¹

In fact, Paul typically spoke of “open doors” when God paved the way for the proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor 16:8-9, 2 Cor 2:12; see also Acts 14:27). Given his desire and skills to “turn any situation into an opportunity for witness,” it seems plausible that Paul was simply requesting God to provide an opportunity for sharing the gospel within his present circumstances.⁵²

Regardless of one’s interpretation of the “open door,” it is clear that Paul recognized God as the source of any opportunity for witness. Equally clear is Paul’s understanding that prayer is the means

by which God opens those doors. Such prayer seeks God's willingness to remove any "hindrance which might be in the way."⁵³

It is possible, then, that Paul's request for an "open door" sought (1) for him, an opportunity to share the gospel, and (2) for his listeners, a readiness to hear. God, though, would be responsible for opening both doors. Such prayer clearly differs from some warfare models that address demons and "claim" unbelievers from Satan. This kind of prayer addresses only God.

Pray for the Witness (Col 4:3-4; Eph 6:19-20)

Not only did Paul request prayer for an open door, but he also sought prayer for himself as the messenger. Specifically, he asked for prayer that he might proclaim the gospel clearly and boldly (Col 4:4, Eph 6:19-20).

Dale Moody's words capture the relationship between these requests:

In Colossians 4:3f. prayer was requested for an open door, but here it is an open mouth. . . . It is not enough to have an open door if there is no opening of the mouth to proclaim the word of God with openness and courage.⁵⁴

Paul's request indicates that he claimed no ability to proclaim God's Word apart from God's power. He was dependent on God not only to open the door for the gospel, but also for the proclamation of the message. His request was simply that when he "opens his mouth . . . God will fill it with the appropriate utterance."⁵⁵ The believer who wears the armor of God is always ready to proclaim the gospel of peace as God leads.

What is *not* mentioned in Colossians 4

and Ephesians 6 is noteworthy as well: Paul did call for prayer, but he did not indicate that the believers were to complete spiritual mapping of the city prior to praying.⁵⁶ He sought prayer to open doors for evangelism, but he did not suggest binding demonic forces or evicting territorial spirits—despite the presence of "a strong belief in dangerous spirits and powers" at Colossae, as at Ephesus.⁵⁷ We conclude that some spiritual warfare emphases cannot be found in the Scriptures.

Admittedly, this is an argument from silence. It is significant, however, that when Paul had opportunity and reason to suggest warfare methodologies for evangelism, he focused instead on prayer and proclamation. Evangelism demands obedient believers, undergirded by prayer and empowered by the Holy Spirit, going to a pagan world and announcing the good news of Christ. God's proclaimed Word is sufficient to weaken Satan's hold.

To summarize, this proposed strategy for doing spiritual warfare includes nothing new or revolutionary—and *that is precisely the point*. We overcome the enemy when we focus on God, understand who we are in Christ, live in holiness and unity, and build godly relationships. As evangelists, we share the gospel most effectively when our lives are pure and when fellow believers are praying for us. Basic, simple, faithful Christian obedience dislodges the enemy.

A Concluding Case Study

The events in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:13-20 provide striking insights into spiritual warfare. Having apparently watched believers exorcise demons, the sons of Sceva attempted to do the same

simply by invoking the name of Jesus. In invoking Jesus' name as if it were a magical charm, they were likely following accepted magical practices in Ephesus.

Peter Wagner correctly recognizes that the sons of Sceva illustrate how *not* to do spiritual warfare.⁵⁸ The demon recognized the names of Jesus and Paul, but he did not recognize the sons. Hence, writes John Polhill, "he was . . . not about to yield any turf to these seven."⁵⁹ The possessed man attacked the sons, overpowered them, and left them naked (19:13-16).

Significantly, the critical spiritual warfare question in this event was *not* whether the exorcists could identify the evil spirit. Instead, the essential question was *whether the spirit knew the names of the sons*.⁶⁰ Apparently they posed no threat to the demonic forces, and the result of their attempted spiritual warfare was tragic. The sons learned the danger of claiming Jesus' name against Satan without authority.

Yet, the disastrous results led others to repent of their continued magical practices (19:17-19). Whether the "magicians" were new converts or already confessing Christians is debated.⁶¹ Regardless, these believers openly and publicly turned from their sin.

They learned that engaging in spiritual warfare without both positional holiness (Eph 1-3) and practical obedience (Eph 4-6) is dangerous, indeed. Thus, their open repentance likely became a first step toward biblical discipleship—and toward a faithfulness and authority that threatened Satan's kingdom. Both as a result of and as evidence of, the renewed commitment of these believers, "the Word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing" (Acts 19:20).

Our goal as church leaders should be to produce believers and grow churches

so faithful to Christ that the enemy is threatened by our presence. We should be alarmed when the enemy asks of our churches, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?"

We *do not* grow such churches, though, by focusing on the devil. Churches that threaten the devil do so precisely because they focus on God. In addition to the principles noted throughout this article, perhaps the following principles will help us to grow this kind of church.

Evangelism must not be separated from the Word of God. Numerous commentators have recognized that Jesus rebuked each of Satan's temptations in the wilderness by quoting Scriptures (Matt 4:1-11).⁶² Clearly, the power of God's Word is sufficient for victory in spiritual warfare. John MacArthur argues, in fact, that knowing God's Word and applying its principles is the *only* way to know victory in the Christian life.⁶³

Likewise, the power of the Word is sufficient to bring lost persons to salvation (1 Cor 1:17-18). The gospel message itself carries power and authority to invade and to overcome Satan's kingdom. The evangelist is to proclaim the Word, for "it gets below the reason and pierces the armor that has been erected against it and comes home to the heart."⁶⁴

The message of evangelism must not be separated from the cross. Our hope for victory in spiritual warfare and evangelism is anchored in the past event of the cross. In the end, Jesus' faithfulness to His messianic role demanded His death. He took on Himself the sin of the world, paid the penalty for that sin, and conquered death (2 Cor 5:21, 1 John 2:2). He ultimately broke Satan's power not by verbally assaulting him, but by His obedience "to the point of death, even death on a

cross" (Phil 2:8).

In the cross, the powers were "disarmed" (Col 2:15), and no principality or power can now separate believers from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39). Satan is indeed a powerful opponent—but the war has already been won. We must proclaim this message loudly to a hurting and dying world.

Evangelism must not be separated from prayer. No programmatic approach to evangelism will itself overcome Satan's blinding of unbelievers. Prayer for God's intervention in the lives of the evangelists, as well as in the lives of lost persons, is a non-negotiable element of evangelism.

Discipleship must not be ignored in the process of evangelism. The church's tendency to make converts rather than disciples has resulted in far too many young believers being struck down by the enemy's arrows. New believers do not automatically understand the concepts of "putting on the armor." We must teach them how to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

A brief survey of the issues raised in this article suggests that this discipleship process must be comprehensive. Believers need to know how to read and apply the Scriptures, how to pray for others, how to relate to others, how to stand against temptation, how to defend their faith, how to recognize false teachings, and how to share the gospel. This process takes time, but it also prepares believers to face real spiritual battles.

We must evangelize, believing that God is ultimately in control. Fear often hinders our willingness to evangelize, even before we consider the reality that evangelism is spiritual warfare. Afraid of rejection or failure, we choose not to share the gospel.

Should Satan hound us with fear, we

need to remember that God is in control of all things, including the enemy. To illustrate, it would appear that the demonic forces had won the day when the sons of Sceva were attacked (Acts 19:11-20). Yet, God ultimately used the defeat of those sons to further His kingdom. Again, the words of William Gurnall are worthy of attention:

This the noblest kind of conquest, to beat back the devil's weapon to the wounding of his own head, yea to cut it off with the devil's own sword. Thus God sets the devil to catch the devil, and lays, as it were, his own counsels under Satan's wings, and makes him hatch them.⁶⁵

We need not fear the enemy, for he remains under God's hand. We are to evangelize the world in faith, wearing the armor of God as we proclaim the good news. May God use us, too, to "open their eyes so they may turn to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18).

ENDNOTES

¹See C. Peter Wagner, *Confronting the Powers* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1996) 1-21, for a survey of Wagner's changing interests.

²Tom White, "Strategic Spiritual Warfare in North America: The Emergence of a New Paradigm" (paper presented to Gideon's Army, Prayer Mountain, Korea, October 1993).

³For example, Neil Anderson's *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1990) had by early 1997 sold 675,000 copies. Ed Silvoso's *That None Should Perish: How to Reach Entire Cities for Christ through Prayer Evangelism* (Ventura, CA:

- Regal, 1994) had likewise sold 200,000 copies. Statistical information gathered in telephone conversation with representatives of Harvest House, February 1997.
- ⁴Cindy Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1991) 224.
- ⁵Lausanne Covenant, Article 12, cited in Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) 82.
- ⁶Vonette Bright and Ben Jennings, eds., *Unleashing the Power of Prayer* (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 16.
- ⁷Harold Lindsell, "Prayer and the Battle for the World," in *Unleashing the Power*, 289.
- ⁸Tom White, "Handling Spiritual Warfare," in *Equipping for Evangelism* (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1996) 406-407.
- ⁹C. Peter Wagner, *Warfare Prayer* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1992) 20.
- ¹⁰Wagner, *Confronting the Powers*, 256-257. The philosophy statement was developed in response to controversies raised over some of the new concepts promoted by the spiritual warfare movement.
- ¹¹Darius Salter, *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 378.
- ¹²Samuel Wilson, "Evangelism and Spiritual Warfare," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 10 (1994-95) 39.
- ¹³Thomas B. White, *The Believer's Guide to Spiritual Warfare* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1990) 23.
- ¹⁴This statement is not to suggest that believers can be possessed by demons. Satan may oppress or harass believers, but I take the position that he cannot gain control over a believer.
- ¹⁵A. Scott Moreau, *Essentials of Spiritual Warfare: Equipped to Win the Battle* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1997) 85.
- ¹⁶William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour: A Treatise of the Saints' War against the Devil* (1864; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995) 1:128.
- ¹⁷Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Satan: His Motives and Methods*, rev. ed. (1919; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990) 70.
- ¹⁸Charles Spurgeon, *Spiritual Warfare in a Believer's Life*, comp. and ed. Robert Hall (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald, 1993) 61.
- ¹⁹Sidney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 184-186.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 184.
- ²¹David Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1999) 211.
- ²²So David Kirkwood contends: "Satan assists people who 'love darkness' to stay in the darkness by supplying them with lies to believe." Kirkwood, *Modern Myths about Satan and Spiritual Warfare* (Pittsburgh: Ethnos, 1994) 110.
- ²³Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 130-131.
- ²⁴J. Dwight Pentecost, *Your Adversary the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997) 114.
- ²⁵"Exclusivism" is defined as "the belief that (1) Jesus Christ is the *only* Savior, and (2) explicit faith in [Him] is necessary for salvation." See Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 11. Pluralism asserts that there are many routes to God. Inclusivism (perhaps the most subtle deception) affirms that Jesus is the only way to God, while denying the need for an explicit, personal faith response to Him.
- ²⁶George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996) 72. The percentage agreeing with this statement increased from 40 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 1994. In a 2000 survey, 34 percent of born-again believers expressed belief that they will go to heaven because they are basically good people. See Barna Research Online, 2000.
- ²⁷For further examination of these concepts from a non-exclusivist position, see Clark Pinnock, *A Wilderness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 153-155; John Sanders, "Inclusivism," in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) 26-29; John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *More Than One Way?: Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 27-59.
- ²⁸Clinton Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 1.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 167. Others recognize the emphasis on powers in Ephesians, including the unique battle imagery of Ephesians 6. See Ralph P. Martin *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox,

- 1991) 75; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990) 434.
- ³⁰Lincoln, 432. See also Page, 247: "Ephesians 6:10-18 appears as the climax of a lengthy section of exhortations, and it is natural to see it as a reinforcement of these exhortations."
- ³¹Ernest Best, *Ephesians* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 59.
- ³²G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 70-71. Caird argues that this subordination of the ethical to the theological is unique to Ephesians among the letters of Paul.
- ³³W. O. Carver, *Ephesians: The Glory of God in the Christian Calling* (Nashville: Broadman, 1949) 24.
- ³⁴Ibid.
- ³⁵Jessie Penn-Lewis, *War on the Saints* (reprint, Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1988) 97-124.
- ³⁶Thomas Ice and Robert Dean, Jr., *A Holy Rebellion* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1990) 76. Furthermore, these authors note that the New Testament epistles mention demons only ten times, but the "flesh" is considered the primary enemy of the Christian more than fifty times (77).
- ³⁷Clinton E. Arnold, "Giving the Devil His Due," *Christianity Today*, 20 August 1990, 19.
- ³⁸Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 124.
- ³⁹Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, 46.
- ⁴⁰David Dockery, *Ephesians: One Body in Christ* (Nashville: Convention, 1996) 72. He cites as evidence Ps 133:1, John 17:21, 1 Cor 12:4-13, and Eph 4:1-6.
- ⁴¹John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (1562; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987) 334.
- ⁴²Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices* (1652; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1993) 198, 207.
- ⁴³Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 167.
- ⁴⁴Roy Yates, "The Powers of Evil in the New Testament," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 52 (1980) 111.
- ⁴⁵Moreau, *Essentials of Spiritual Warfare*, 57-58.
- ⁴⁶James Montgomery Boice and A. Skevington Wood, *Galatians and Ephesians, The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 177.
- ⁴⁷Gary D. Kinnaman, *Overcoming the Dominion of Darkness: Personal Strategies for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1990) 108. Disrupting relationships among believers also further weakens the unity of the church.
- ⁴⁸E.g., Gurnall argued that the breastplate of righteousness is both passively applied and actively exercised: the believer is passive in the production of this righteousness, but he is "afterward active, and co-working with the Spirit in all actions of holiness." See Gurnall, 1:407-408.
- ⁴⁹This chart, although original, reflects adaptations from several sources. See A. Scott Moreau, *INTR 567: Spiritual Conflict* (Wheaton: Moreau, 1994) 15:9; Daniel L. Akin, *Riches and Responsibilities: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Louisville: Daniel Akin, 1997) 7; *The Open Bible*, expanded ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 1160-1161.
- ⁵⁰Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 41-42.
- ⁵¹Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1982) 239. O'Brien refers to Phil 1:12, 13 for evidence of this statement.
- ⁵²Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1991) 322. Melick notes Paul's varying evangelistic approaches at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34), Jerusalem (Acts 21:17-22:29), before Jewish and Roman officials (Acts 24-26), and even after natural disasters (Acts 27:13-26; 28:1-10).
- ⁵³T. K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1897) 297.
- ⁵⁴Dale Moody, *Christ and the Church: An Exposition of Ephesians with Special Application to Some Present Issues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 149.
- ⁵⁵Lincoln, 454.
- ⁵⁶"Spiritual mapping" is the process of discerning spiritual factors and forces in a city's history that continue to influence the spiritual nature of the city. "Territorial spirits" (mentioned in the next sentence in this paragraph) are demonic powers that have been given influence over specific sites or cities. The validity of both concepts is heavily debated.
- ⁵⁷Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Chris-*

tianity and Folk Belief at Colossae (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 310.

⁵⁸C. Peter Wagner, *Blazing the Way: A New Look at Acts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1995) 166-168.

⁵⁹John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 404.

⁶⁰Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 93.

⁶¹Wagner, *Confronting the Powers*, 216, and Garrett, 95, imply that these repentant magicians were unbelievers turning to the Lord. Others contend that these persons were already confessing Christians; e.g., see Polhill, 405; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 690-691. I take the latter position.

⁶²See, e.g., Michael Green, *Matthew for Today: Expository Study of Matthew* (Dallas: Word, 1989) 64-65; Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 150; William L. Banks, *The Day Satan Met Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 80.

⁶³John MacArthur, Jr., *How to Meet the Enemy* (Wheaton: Victor, 1992) 149.

⁶⁴Ray C. Stedman, *Spiritual Warfare* (Waco: Word, 1976) 109.

⁶⁵Gurnall, 1:407-408.

