

Understanding Spiritual Warfare

A coven of witches takes out a “contract” on a local church, declaring they have agreed to summon up powers to destroy its presence and effectiveness in the local community. The newspaper considers it a journalistic “no-brainer” and ignores the story (a piece about redevelopment of a dilapidated housing block runs instead).

A Muslim man enters the back door of a missionary’s home and shoots an assistant, a convert to Christianity, before throwing away the gun and beating a hasty retreat through a neighbour’s garage. Neighbours observe the get-away, but don’t want to get involved. The local authorities do nothing, fearing a backlash from the dominant Sunni community.

A Christian nursing sister retires from a developing country because of chronic illness, only to discover there is nothing wrong with her, but that an opponent of her work has engaged the services of a witchdoctor to cast spells on her over a prolonged period. She tells an incredulous counsellor what she has discovered, only to be told not to believe such quackery. But when she asks Christians to help her overcome this debilitating problem, the symptoms completely disappear.

These are real stories and I can vouch for their authenticity. What they have in common is a “warfare” between the Christian church and what the Bible calls the “powers of darkness”. The world is a spiritual battlefield. If we wish to be discerning and relevant Christians in the new century, we need to understand clearly the spiritual nature of the conflict, acknowledge it is real and have a solution that is both Bible-based and effective. We also need to be able to operate with the power of God against the deception and bondage in which so many millions are bound.

Fig leaf, figurative, figment or fact?

If we study the Bible we find the roots of spiritual warfare lie in a combination of an ancient conflict between God and Satan; the disobedience of Adam and Eve, when they committed treason against God and recognised (*de jure*) the “god of this world”; and authority given to Christians to withstand the forces of evil.

This is not the case in many of the world’s cultures. A woman in an indigenous (“Orang Asli”) tribe in Malaysia once told me her clan is nomadic, principally because of spirits that visit them from time to time. “An elephant knocked down one of our huts and we moved, because the spirits were attacking us. If someone gets sick or dies, we move. To continue to live in the same place is taboo because our whole lives are influenced by *spiritual warfare*” (her words).

Across the entire animistic, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Daoist worlds men and women fear spirits, but lack the knowledge or power to deal with them.

Only a generation that does not believe in God readily rejects the notion of malevolent spirits at work in the human community. We should not be surprised. After all, who seriously believes the arch-enemy of the human race is a red man with a pitch fork and horns? At the same time, well read, rational, intelligent people delve into palm reading, horoscopes, neo-paganism, witchcraft, crystal ball gazing, telepathy, clairvoyance, spiritualism, divination and foretelling, all of which have spiritual roots.

There are Christians and denominations today that state they do not believe Satan is real. A popular Bible commentary in my library declares that we need no longer fear demons in the stars. Other writers attribute psychological factors to accounts of demonic influence recorded in the Scriptures.

The Bible, on the other hand, teaches us that Satan is real. Jesus affirmed this fact throughout his ministry. "Spiritual warfare" is not just a term used by people who organise prayer walks and marches for Jesus and use esoteric language such as "strategic level spiritual warfare" and "forays into enemy territory to bind and loose". Nor is it an element of spiritualised fiction, as though we were engaged in some sort of out-of-body experience or fictitious inter-galactic dog-fight. It is a dimension of our world, describing the work of Satan against God and his servants (Job 1:6-12) and the response of those who act in Christ's name and confront evil head-on.

The Gospel record includes literal encounters between Satan and Jesus (Luke 4:2-13 is just one). The Apostle John told the early church that the whole world lies under the influence of the Evil One (1 John 5:19). Far from being an overt "evil creature" of comic books, he often transforms himself into an Angel of Light, so that his work is considered benign, attractive even, it is not recognised as inherently evil (2 Corinthians 11:14). Paul declared in his letter to the church at Rome that God would crush Satan under their feet (Romans 16:20).

If we do not know how to deal with spiritual attack, we can end up being blind-sided, discouraged, disempowered and dispossessed. We can miss the real causes of things that occur in our lives. When my wife (a teacher) was involved in a vehicle accident outside a school in Singapore, a local Chinese man told her to look out for ghosts. Daoists believe that the gates of hell are opened in the seventh lunar month and that ghosts are allowed out to roam the earth. They are believed to wreak havoc, inflicting physical damage and sickness and must be appeased. Taoists believe that the only way to satisfy them, and receive protection, is to burn incense sticks and paper money (real cash or special festive notes), combined with songs, opera and family gatherings. When the ghosts have had enough, the human participants partake. My response to the accident was to gather my family around and pray for protection, knowing that our God is stronger than the forces of evil. We do not need to be afraid of spiritual adversaries, but it is important that we confront them head-on, in the name of Jesus Christ, when they seek to touch our lives. Spiritual warfare is not just "hokey-pokey" or silly superstitions on the part of "other" cultures. It is real.

The Scripture calls Satan (lit. “adversary”) the “evil one”; the “tempter”; the “devil” (or “slanderer”); the “father of lies”, a “murderer”, the “Prince of this World”, the “God of this world”, the “Prince of the power of the air”, the “ruler of darkness”, the “destroyer” and the “accuser”. There are many references in Scripture to demons and evil spirits; a hierarchy of spiritual beings opposed to God is described in Scripture. Every reference to evil spiritual beings is literal. To deny their existence is to play into their hands. The Bible is the Word of God, so we make no apology, theologically or otherwise, for believing Satan is real, is a personal supernatural being and that our transition from irrational superstition in the Middle Ages to a highly developed world has not altered the incontrovertible fact of his existence.

Why “warfare”?

The term “warfare” is used in Scripture, because Satan is opposed to God and the followers of Christ take sides against him in electing Jesus over this world.

From the moment of Jesus’ birth until the instant of his death, Satan used various means to destroy him. He stirred up Herod to kill all the babies in the district where the infant Jesus lived. He provoked the religious leaders to try to trap Jesus into saying and doing things worthy of extra-judicial execution. He put it into the hands of others to attempt to lynch Jesus when they disagreed with his teaching. He tried to convince Jesus to leap off the top of the temple. Finally, he drove the religious leaders to put an end to it all by killing Jesus.

The Bible declares that the crucifixion of Christ, far from being defeat, was (combined with the resurrection) the moment Jesus defeated the power of Satan and triumphed over him (Colossians 2:15). Having failed to neutralise Jesus, Satan has ever after sought to destroy the people of God, the church, through persecution or deception. He attacks humanity through demon possession, depression, oppression, deception, self-destruction (including suicide), sickness and mental and spiritual enslavement. The Bible talks about lying spirits, unclean spirits, seducing spirits and demonic inspirations for false religions.

Christians are engaged in a spiritual warfare, not against people, but “wicked spirits in heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). God wants us to live victoriously. The issues, at heart, are not about people, but spiritual enemies.

Over the years, there has been much misunderstanding about this topic, including simple mistakes (like simulating the casting out of “demons of chocolate” and “spirits of ballet” from peoples’ lives), spiritual elitism and abuse. That misunderstanding has caused a cloud of scepticism to descend on many Christians, who think the whole discussion is unbiblical “fluff”. However, ask any shaman, witch or spiritualist whether the power with they are operating in exists and they will assure you the spirit world is just as real as the physical one.

Spiritual warfare is global in its reach. Since the inception of man’s rebellion against God, the devil has exercised major control over parts of God’s world and he simply does not want to let them go.

In India it is common to see Christian and Hindu iconography side by side, competing or complementing one another, depending on one's religious paradigms. However, spiritual warfare is more than a clash of icons. Liberal theologians reject spiritual warfare. They do not believe the devil is real, preferring to attribute evil in the world to other, usually human, causes. Make no mistake. Jesus saw his ministry as a struggle between spiritual forces. Spiritual forces are real; they are around us and they are bent on destroying our faith as Christians. They are totally opposed to Christ in us.

An important clarification is in order here. Some people find in spiritual malevolence the excuse they need for sinful lifestyles based on personal choices, not demonic activity. The Bible tells us clearly that such choices include sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, drunkenness, orgies, even idolatry and witchcraft (Galatians 5:19-21). Some witchcraft is demonically inspired; at other times those who get involved do so simply as an expression of their sinful nature.

How do spiritual attacks occur?

In spiritual warfare attacks can be physical, psychological, or in the spirit realm. If they are physical, such as Satanically-inspired persecution of believers, their causes can be misunderstood by non-Christians. If they occur in the spirit realm, unbelievers are not able to detect what is really going on, but both sides in the conflict appreciate full well what is involved. Let me explain, drawing on a couple of life examples. The first is the use of physical attack; the second is a case of attempted spiritual manipulation.

In March 2000, in response to a complex and hugely controversial set of circumstances, a coalition of military forces invaded Iraq and toppled the tyrannical regime of President Saddam Hussein. The fall-out in the Arab world provided a cover for attacks against Christians. Churches in the Middle East (where I lived at the time) were attacked because they were perceived to be tools of the West. US President George W Bush's reference to the program to replace Hussein as a "crusade" fuelled anger in Muslim communities around the world that for centuries have harboured resentment against Christians for the Crusades in the Middle Ages (irrespective of brutalities committed by Islamic regimes over hundreds of years). Western interests were attacked, often physically.

This was the charged atmosphere in which an attack against a Western fast food outlet in Lebanon, orchestrated by an Islamic organisation, nearly caused a backlash against Christians in that country. One Sunday afternoon, following the fall of Baghdad, patrons in a busy McDonalds restaurant in Dora, a port suburb of Beirut, were startled to hear explosions in the male toilet. Someone had deposited two hand grenades in a waste paper bin, which exploded, killing or injuring a number of people. Diners rushed outside en masse. What they did not know was that a vehicle loaded with over 500 kilograms of explosives was parked near the exit. As they rushed through the door a terrorist with a remote control device triggered the detonator. The only thing that averted carnage was

that the fact that the detonator misfired, exploding through the car window instead of the explosives.

But for this fact, massive devastation would have occurred as the outlet was packed with customers and the building itself was on the main north-south arterial, choked with traffic. In a bizarre twist, police and military investigators found Christian slogans on the car and Christian materials inside the vehicle. It initially appeared the attack had been launched by a Christian group. After a quarter of a century of civil war in Lebanon, sectarian tensions are not far below the surface. A terrorist attack by Christians would have added fuel to the now dormant conflict. Investigators discovered that the car had been decorated as a Christian bomb by Muslim terrorists (subsequently arrested), as an attack against Christians. A number of evangelical Christian leaders identified the plot as a Satanically-inspired attack against the witness of the Christian church in the Arab world. This was a very overt form of spiritual warfare.

Another way to explain the clash of spiritual powers is to recount an experience in which I was involved a few years ago.

The occasion was a national feminist gathering in which participants camped opposite the national Parliament in Canberra. Bill (not his real name) came to tell me a delegation of “witches” planned to surround the Parliament and raise a “cone of power”. In Neo-pagan witchcraft this is a field of spiritual energy produced by witches, who join hands while dancing around and chanting to “raise” the power and cast a spell. Witches have claimed victories against hostile forces by using cones of power against the leaders of various countries.

A new Christian friend (let’s call him Bill) had been heavily involved in black magic, witchcraft and cabalistic groups until he gave his life to Christ and publicly burned his books and other related tools of trade. He explained the intention of this exercise was to summon up the power of witchcraft in Australia to influence the nation’s leaders.

When Bill and I arrived at the Parliament building with members of our congregation, the women had surrounded the building. From our count, there were several hundred, beating drums, chanting, casting spells and calling out to demonic spirits to take control over the country. I phoned a fellow Christian minister and he came to join me in confronting the group with prayer. This was to be a real power encounter, not merely “conservative Christians versus feminists”.

We took our places near the entrance to the Parliament and began to sing and to pray against the invocations of the women. In no time, numbers of women moved to where we were standing. Shouting virulent curses, calling for our physical harm, they made several attempts to encircle us. The louder the drums and tambourines sounded, the louder we prayed, speaking the name of Jesus over the Parliament, neutralising the curses and claiming God’s blessing and favour on our nation. It probably sounds weird, but we had never been in a

situation like this. Whenever it looked as though we would be surrounded, those on the ends found they could go no further and broke off. After an hour of confrontation, the drums suddenly ceased. The curses stopped. The woman went off in different directions. Their attempts to surround the Parliament were abandoned. A radio announcement by the organisers, later in the afternoon, said the plan had been cancelled. Within two days the camp was abandoned. The real implications were not in the physical realm, but the spiritual arena. We may never know what took place, but those of us who had gathered to pray felt as though a huge burden had been lifted from our shoulders and our prayers turned to praise. By-standers asked us what had occurred and we were able to witness to many about the Lordship and saving power of Jesus Christ.

The Bible warns us not to allow Satan a foot-hold in our lives (Ephesians 4:27). This context in the original Greek was a military one, referring to an enemy who sought to gain a bridgehead, from which a concerted push could be made. If we allow the devil to get a bridgehead in our lives or community, it is easier for him to attack. That is why we are urged to ensure there are no access or entry points.

How do we wage spiritual warfare?

We begin by recognising the over-riding power of Jesus Christ. He is supreme. Jesus promised his disciples “power over all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:19), including the authority to cast out devils (Mark 16:17).

As believers, we are equipped with basic spiritual discernment, to enable us to distinguish between issues that are human and those that are not. Higher level discernment is a gift from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10). Often spiritual awareness is sharpened through prayer and fasting.

Spiritual warfare is not based on our own knowledge, strength, wisdom or traditions. It is not a physical conflict (Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 10:4). Nor is it about personalities, temperaments or the particular traits of people. It is spiritual by nature and requires spiritual weapons. Ephesians 6:11-18 tells us these are: truth, righteousness (right standing and living before God), the Gospel of peace, faith, our salvation, the Word of God and prayer. We need to use these weapons every day of our lives. In addition, we are called, not to be passive, but to “resist” the devil, and are assured that he will flee from us (James 4:7). We have at our disposal the power of God (2 Corinthians 10:4; Psalm 44:5); and the name of Jesus (Philippians 2:10-11). The Holy Spirit helps us to remain alert to what is going on in the spiritual realm we cannot see with our physical eyes.

There are people all around us who are bound by invisible forces they do not understand and cannot defeat. Jesus came to set captives free (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). Let’s take up the weapons the Holy Spirit has given us and work with Him, through power evangelism and anointed prayer, to defeat the enemy and proclaim Christ the victor.

Relevant churches in the new millennium are equipped to wage warfare against spiritual strongholds in individuals, communities, cities and even nations.

Through our faith we are empowered to wage an effective warfare, gain the victory (1 John 5:4b) and see lives transformed.