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# A Biblical Evaluation of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare

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**S**piritual Warfare is the hot topic on the evangelical 'circuit' today. This can be seen in the large number of books published, seminars and meetings held, dealing with this subject over the past few years. There is a preoccupation with the spirit realm and its influence on the world and lives of individual Christians. This has given rise to a sense of urgency in certain groups that the church needs to do something to deal with these forces of evil. As a result many churches are becoming caught up in practices like 'spiritual mapping', 'prayer walks', 'on-the-spot praying', etc.

Perhaps no books have affected the thinking of Christians on the subject of Spiritual Warfare more than Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, and its sequel *Piercing the Darkness*. In his novels, Peretti depicts spiritual warfare against the backdrop of New-Age globalism. A strong impression is created that believers are in constant combat with the forces of evil. Although Peretti did not intend his books to be taken as anything other than fiction, nevertheless, as Dr Kim Riddlebarger points out, 'People have in many cases, actually redefined their views of the supernatural based upon a fictional novel'. He asserts further: 'Cumulatively, this has produced a whole new generation of Christians who now see the world through a supernatural grid that has more in common with Greek and Persian mystery religions than with Christianity.'<sup>1</sup>

This does not mean there are no serious books on this subject available. We have books written by Dr Rebecca Brown who has worked out a whole system of rebuking and binding Satan and the demonic forces. Then there is Dr Neil Anderson who has written extensively about spiritual warfare as it manifests itself in the life of the individual believer. Among his books are *Victory Over Darkness* and *Walking Through Darkness*. Mark Bubeck in his *Overcoming the Adversary* takes the spiritual armour of Ephesians 6:11-18, and turns it into a prayer formula.<sup>2</sup> He urges believers to pray the protection of the armour for each family member every day. Then there is a proliferation of books by Dr Peter Wagner, like *Breaking Strongholds in Your City*, *Praying with Power*, *Confronting the Powers* and *Confronting the Queen of Heaven*. Charles Kraft has written a book about demonised Christians entitled *Defeating Dark Angels*. In his book *Deep Wounds, Deep Healing*, Kraft seeks to explicate the connection between spiritual warfare and inner healing. Tom White in *Breaking Strongholds: How Spiritual Warfare Sets Captives Free*, instructs believers in the techniques necessary for breaking Satan's hold on our age. Others who have written serious teaching books on the subject are George Otis, Peter Lundell, and Dick Eastman etc.

This interest in spiritual warfare among evangelicals Christians should be seen as part of a growing recognition of the existence and reality of the spiritual realm, which is clearly evident in the increased interest in Western societies in the occult and the world of spirits in the media, films, books, television and magazines. Dave Hunt and

TA McMahon, authors of America *The Sorcerer's New Apprentice* stress that today 'we are witnessing far and away the greatest occult explosion of all time'. They point out that, 'Primitive pagan religious practices that were generally confined to undeveloped Third World countries (and were regarded in the West with suspicion and ridicule only a few years ago) are now being embraced by increasing millions of enthusiasts worldwide'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Clinton Arnold in his book *Powers of Darkness*, states that there is a 'burgeoning interest in the occult [which] is not a local fad but a trend in Western society'.<sup>4</sup> He too speaks of an 'occult explosion'.

Initially, the study of spiritual warfare among evangelicals focused on its cosmic manifestations, i.e., between God and his angels, and Satan and his forces, and also on the way it manifests itself in the lives of individual believers. More recently another level of spiritual warfare has been getting attention, known as Environmental spiritual warfare. By this is meant demonic influences in our environment. This has nothing to do with our ecosystems or natural resources. Rather, it refers to demonic influences in society and the world around us. In particular, it is claimed that cities, regions and nations are bound over to Satan and his underlings. These are identified as territorial spirits who are seen to be responsible for communities being given over to crime, poverty, violence, immorality etc. One aspect of their power is to keep unbelievers from believing the gospel and coming to faith in Christ.

Dr Peter Wagner and George Otis are leading promoters of this concept. They have written extensively on this subject. Peter Wagner is Head of Global Harvest Ministries with their offices in the World Prayer Centre in Colorado, Springs, USA. George Otis is president and founder of the research group called the 'Sentinel', and head of AD 2000 United Prayer Track's Spiritual Mapping Division. His main contribution is to help with research on the spiritual history of cities and regions. The objective is to identify social bondages and demonic strongholds in these areas.

Peter Wagner believes that Satan controls countries, regions, tribes, communities, residential areas and social networks in the world. It is these territorial spirits and demonic strongholds that are responsible for the domination of evil in society. In his book, *Warfare Prayer*, Wagner says that Christians are to expel territorial spirits from cities. He asserts that the only way we are going to liberate these areas is through united prayer. People cannot respond to the gospel until we liberate the cities and nations. He believes that God saves society only after the church smashes the demonic strongholds.<sup>5</sup>

A whole strategy has been worked out to deal with the territorial spirits. This teaching is known as *Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare*. Prof. Johan Malan of the University of the North, South Africa, in a research article referring to the popularity of this teaching amongst evangelicals, states, 'Many people are looking for solutions to the spiritual decline of our time. One of the solutions is that a "new" kind of revival should be promoted, which is based on ecumenical unity and strategic spiritual warfare. Demons must be driven from towns, cities and entire countries to set people free to serve the Lord'.<sup>6</sup>

This concept of spiritual warfare is being promoted in South Africa through NUPSA (Network For United Prayer in Southern Africa), under the leadership of an ordained Dutch Reformed minister, Dr Bennie Mostert. Recently this concept of

spiritual warfare praying was brought into prominence when a united prayer rally was held in Newlands, Cape Town with more than 40,000 Christians from all denominations attending.

In this article we are going to look at this new teaching on Spiritual Warfare and in particular we will give attention to the concept of Strategic Level Prayer. We will attempt to evaluate it in the light of the Scriptures.

## **Description and Main Features of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare**

*Strategic level spiritual warfare* against territorial spirits is a relatively new emphasis. It focuses on discerning, naming of and praying against demonic spirits over cities, regions and nations, who are then rebuked, bound, and evicted, thus allowing the work of evangelism to proceed. What are the main features of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare?

- The existence and influence of territorial spirits or dynasties on communities, cities and nations.
- The need for strategic level prayer.
- The goal—revival and the total transformation of communities—the Christianising of communities.

### **The existence and influence of territorial spirits or dynasties on communities, cities and nations**

Peter Wagner, in his book *Praying with Power*, asks the question, ‘How can we make certain the cities of our nations and of the world are open to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ?’<sup>7</sup> He allows John DeVries of Mission 21 India to answer: ‘The devil has created “sound barriers” around every city and every people group; spiritual sound barriers which can only be torn down through prayer’.<sup>8</sup>

What are these ‘sound barriers’? They are ‘demonic, spiritual walls which keep people from hearing the gospel,’<sup>9</sup> Dr Neil Anderson referring to the link between binding Satan and evangelism insists, ‘He will hold on to these people until we demand their release on the basis of our authority in Christ. Once Satan is bound through prayer, he must let go.’<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Rebecca Brown, using Ezekiel 22:30–32 asserts that God looks for those who are willing to stand and fight Satan and his demons to stop them from blinding the people so that they can see their need for a saviour. She maintains, ‘We as Christian warriors must be willing to stand in the gap and fight in the spiritual realm to break the demonic forces blinding the unsaved’.<sup>11</sup>

According to Wagner, Satan sends senior demons to control countries, regions, communities, residential areas and social networks to keep people from believing the gospel. They keep these areas in bondage through spiritual strongholds.

How are these strongholds established? From his research, George Otis confidently believes that, ‘... strongholds are born wherever cultures welcome evil powers into their midst through unambiguous pacts ... and ... strongholds are extended when the provisions of these pacts are honoured by successive generations’. What happens is the demonic spirits secure ‘lease extensions’ over these areas through religious festivals

and pilgrimages, cultural traditions like initiation rites and ancestor worship, syncretism and unresolved social injustices. These things 'release significant power'.<sup>12</sup>

These strongholds have been established where people were involved in pagan and ancestor worship, sorcery, superstition, prostitution, gambling, abortion, poverty, crime etc. They also include historic war battlefields where men killed each other giving rise to hostile feelings and racial intolerance. It includes sins committed in the past, rumours and legends that can act as a curse over a community. According to Alistair Petrie, 'these geographical strongholds result from the "defilement of sin", which serve as "feeding troughs" for demons and their followers'.<sup>13</sup> These sins bring defilement to a land and place it under the judgment of God. According to NUPSA newsletter: 'Because of the defilement of the land through sin, the people who live in the land, even though they were not the ones to commit the original sin that caused the defilement, are under God's judgment.'<sup>14</sup>

How are these strongholds identified? Through a process called *Spiritual Mapping*. By means of a map of the respective area and following a special procedure, possible strongholds used by the enemy are identified. Extensive research is also conducted into the history of the area. According to Otis: 'The best mappers are people who have made a conscious commitment to the land and community'.<sup>15</sup> It is to them that God reveals his secrets. Armed with this intelligence one can proceed to smash these strongholds. This brings us to the heart of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare.

## **The Need for Strategic Level praying as a prerequisite for evangelising and revival**

According to one of the local mapping documents: 'Fervent and focused prayer can bind spiritual strongmen to effect the deliverance re captives (Matthew 12:24-30) and open the minds of unbelievers which are blinded by the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:3-4), but must be sustained by intimate knowledge of the enemy's deployments and strategies. Hopefully, as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 2:11, 'we are not unaware of his schemes'.<sup>16</sup> Strategic level focused prayer takes several forms. Churches are called to unite in mass prayer rallies. During these prayer meetings the demons are rebuked, bound and cast out in the name of Jesus. The area is then claimed for Jesus and 'Gatekeepers' are appointed to guard all entrances to the city to prevent the demons from returning.

Christian unity is seen as a precondition for bringing down the strongholds of an area. Peter Wagner believes that a major starting point in bringing down strongholds is for pastors in a specific area to pray together. He states: 'My rule goes like this: Secure the unity of the pastors and other Christian leaders in the area and begin to pray together on a regular basis.'<sup>17</sup> He gives his reason: 'Pastors are the divinely designated spiritual gatekeepers of a given city ... When I use the term 'spiritual gatekeepers', I am raising the issue of authority. When the gatekeepers link together in one accord ... the realm of darkness ... becomes seriously threatened.'<sup>18</sup>

According to Peter Wagner, it is also important to pray in the area where strongholds are located. What is his justification for this practice? He claims that God gave Joshua 1:3 as a 'prophetic word' to the church. God promised Joshua that 'Every place that the sole of your foot will treat upon I have given you'.<sup>19</sup> He is adamant that although this promise was made to Joshua for a particular situation, nevertheless, God

has given it to the church as a prayer principle. On the basis of this 'prophetic word', he insists: 'If we want to have our communities transformed by the power of God we must pull down the walls. We must place the soles of our feet out into the community itself by employing our principal weapon of spiritual warfare: namely prayer.'<sup>20</sup>

Although Wagner admits that the power of prayer knows no boundaries, yet, '... on-site prayer is almost always more effective than distant prayer'.<sup>21</sup> He bases his reasoning on healing prayer and examples of this principle working in other areas. This is also the basis of 'Prayer Walking', which Wagner defines as: 'praying on-site with insight. It is simply praying in the very places that we expect God to bring forth his answers.' 'Marches for Jesus' fall in the same category. It is believed that these marches have the effect of opening up the atmosphere over a town or area.

Also important, according to Chuck Pierce, who is Vice President of Global Harvest Ministry, is to pray with 'apostolic authority'. He insists that, 'Praying with apostolic authority is a real key to breaking open territories. Apostolic praying is more pioneering, birthing, and penetrating than normal communal prayer.'<sup>22</sup> Apostolic authority obviously belongs to special gifted men who exercise an apostolic and prophetic ministry over the church.

### **The Goal—Revival and Transformation of the Community.**

The goal of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare is nothing less than the total transformation of society through revival following the expulsion of the territorial spirits and the breakdown of the demonic strongholds. It is claimed that this results in the Christianising of society as Christians are appointed to positions of authority at national and local government level. There is a strong expectation that by the end of 2003 many societies will be transformed and many key positions will be occupied by Christians. This is seen as the only solution to the problems of our country and the world. Proponents of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare are confident that this is God's will for the Church at this time. God is waiting to bring about transformation. The Church must hear what God is revealing through his 'anointed' leaders.

Apparently there are places around the world that have been transformed after Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare prayer. A video has been released in which four communities that have allegedly been transformed are portrayed. However, according to Prof. Malan, 'Since the release of the video, various groups have conducted research in these areas to verify the claims made. They found many of the claims exaggerated and often false.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Evaluation of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare**

There are features of this movement that should be welcomed by all Christians. Firstly, its reminder that the Church is involved in a spiritual conflict must be heeded. According to Robert Lescelius: 'Without a recognition of the spiritual warfare between God and Satan history will be as "confusing as a football game in which half the players are invisible"'. This conflict is magnified when it comes to the matter of revival.'<sup>24</sup>

In the second place, if this movement has done nothing else, it has alerted us to the desperate condition of the world at this present time and our need for revival. Therefore its emphasis on prayer is a healthy one. Both the Bible and history show that there is

an inseparable link between revival and prayer. Their call to Christians everywhere to pray is one that should be taken seriously if we are going to see a change in our society.

However, although the Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare movement has drawn in many Christians from all over the world, both Charismatic and non-Charismatic, particularly in the United States, many evangelicals are disturbed by some of its key teachings which they believe have no biblical support but are based rather on experience, extra-revelation and pragmatism.

The position taken in this evaluation is that any teaching must be tested by Scripture alone. This has always been the standpoint taken by historic evangelicalism. Regarding the current teaching on spiritual warfare, Fred Leahy insists that, 'There is a crying need for an examination of this whole subject in the light of Scripture alone, bearing in mind that the Scriptures are our only rule of faith and practice'.<sup>25</sup> And Clinton Arnold contends that, 'In recent years despite the flood of popular publications dealing with "spiritual warfare", very little has been written from a biblical-theological perspective'.<sup>26</sup>

It is the thesis of this article that much of this teaching is spurious and is predicated upon non-biblical and thus theologically weak premises. It is therefore our purpose to evaluate the key features of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare in the light of the Scripture.

### **What the Old Testament discloses regarding the existence and influence of territorial spirits.**

We begin in the Old Testament because advocates of this view base much of their theology on the reference to the celestial warfare between God's angels and the angelic prince of Persia in Daniel 10. From this passage they draw the principle that angelic agents are apparently assigned to sponsorship and control of certain cities or regions.

There is no doubt that the book of Daniel presents us with a fascinating picture of this. We are told about a vision that God gave to Daniel. In this vision, which was mediated by an angel, he learns about the activities of the angels set over the nations of Persia, Greece and even Israel. The first part of the vision is taken up with descriptions of angelic war and conflict. Yet this heavenly conflict was closely tied to the fate of nations and peoples.

Further support for this view is the references to the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14 and the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28, which seem to transcend human kings and move into the heavenly realm. Revelation 2:13 where we read about Pergamos as 'the place where Satan's throne is' further confirms the angelic assignment to geographical regions.

Although Daniel, especially chapter 10, discloses the reality of angels who have some kind of territorial authority over nations, it does not support any sort of human involvement in angelic warfare. Far from finding Daniel involved in warfare prayer, discerning and praying against regional spirits, we find him frustrated in the absence of response to his prayer to God. In fact, he is totally unaware of angelic warfare until the angel explains the reason why God did not respond to his prayer sooner.

When one turns to the vision in chapters 11–12 we see that Daniel is not given information of warfare in angelic realms. What he sees is the emergence and disappearance of evil world kingdoms until the eventual victory of God. Daniel is given

the vision not in response to a request or by means of spiritual discernment but in response to his personal faith and obedience. In any case, Daniel stands in the line of specially chosen men who were 'were carried along by the Holy Spirit' as they wrote Scripture (2 Peter 1:21). Through Daniel God encouraged his people by prophetically reminding them that he remained faithful to his covenant and that he would overcome the forces of evil at the appointed time. This victory would occur when God's messiah destroyed the evil kingdoms as a rock crushing a statue and filling the whole earth (Daniel 2:34–35), when one like a Son of Man annihilated the dominion of the evil one forever (Daniel 7:10–28). In all this, there is no hint of discerning, binding or praying against cosmic evil spirits.

Even that often quoted passage Ezekiel 22:30–32 which is interpreted to mean that we must 'stand in the gap' so that unbelievers can be saved, does not apply to spiritual warfare. It related to a particular occasion in the history of Judah. Ezekiel bemoaned the fact that corruption was so ubiquitous that there was not even one man who was willing to stop the national ruin. There 'was no-one with the moral courage to stem the tide: the leaders were ungodly and those who should have been godly had compromised their position'.<sup>27</sup> In other words there is no indication in the text itself that this was a normative prayer principle. As Gerry Breshears points out, 'One searches in vain ... for the work of strategic spiritual warfare in these or indeed anywhere in the Bible'.<sup>28</sup> It is also significant that the Old Testament reveals no details on discerning information about demons, including their names, hierarchies and functions.

Another key concept of the Spiritual Warfare movement based on the Old Testament, is the idea that curses can be passed on from generation to generation and that it is necessary for us to repent of the sins of our ancestors. Reference is made to Exodus 20:4–5 and 34:6–7 where God tells Moses that he would 'not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation'. Reference is also made to Nehemiah where the returned exiles confessed not only their own sins but also the sins of their fathers (Nehemiah 9:1–2). Using these passages for support, Rebecca Brown comments: 'The sins of our ancestors do have a grave effect upon our own lives and the doorway of inheritance must be closed by prayer, confession, and the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. Specific abilities and demons are passed down from generation to generation'.<sup>29</sup> It is assumed that this principle is applicable under the new covenant.

Neil Anderson likewise suggests that demonic afflictions may be passed within a family from one generation to another.<sup>30</sup> With this in mind Anderson uses a 'confidential personal inventory' with counsellees to uncover possible 'occultic, cultic, or non-Christian religious practices of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents'.<sup>31</sup>

However, the reference in Exodus should be understood as a description of severe judgment in which an individual's line is cut off; not a transference [demonic or otherwise] of particular sins to the next generation. Brown and Anderson ignore the focus on individual responsibility in Jeremiah 31:29–30 which occurs in the context of the promise of a new covenant that, 'In those days people will no longer say, "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". Instead,

everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge.’ We have a similar statement in Ezekiel 18:18–22. This is incompatible with the idea of inheriting demonic curses.<sup>32</sup> David Moore and Robert Pyne maintain that, ‘This doctrine rests on the assumption that our vulnerability to demonic influence derives from physical or symbolic contact or contiguity with some object, word, or person rather than on moral, spiritual and doctrinal grounds—an assumption which is at the heart of magic and animism—but which Biblical Christianity nowhere propagates’.<sup>33</sup> Aside from this, surely the question we have to ask is whether the New Testament teaches that the principle of generational curses applies to Christians? The answer is clearly, no. Nowhere in the Gospels or the Letters are Christians told to repent for the sins of their ancestors.

Clinton Arnold points out that it was only during the intertestamental period that Jewish literature began to develop an undue interest in the realm of angels, spirits and demons.<sup>34</sup> Details were given of the number of angels, their names and their hierarchies. For example, some of the names by which demons were identified were Asmodaeus, Semyaza, Azazel, Mastema, and Beliar. All of the detail went far beyond what was revealed in the Old Testament. Arnold makes an interesting observation: ‘Much of this burgeoning curiosity about the spirit realm can be attributed to a growing tendency to distance God from direct involvement in daily life’.<sup>35</sup> In other words, they had lost their view of God’s sovereignty over all things.

What this proves is that the present preoccupation with identifying territorial spirits and the names of demons is not something new. It goes back to before the New Testament and went beyond biblical revelation. But to what extent do we see this understanding of the spiritual powers reflected in the New Testament?

## **A New Testament perspective on Spiritual Warfare**

One cannot read the gospels without an awareness of the reality of the spiritual powers and their opposition to the presence and ministry of Jesus Christ. One suspects that Satan directly inspired Herod to command the murder of all babies two years and under (Matthew 3:16, Revelation 12:4). At the very commencement of Jesus’ public ministry Satan tried to draw him away from his mission (Matthew 4:1–11). He faced opposition from the Pharisees and Jewish leaders whom he identified as belonging to their father the devil.

So the gospels in no way ignore the presence of the spiritual powers. Yet it is never portrayed as an equal conflict. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus declared that he came to set prisoners free, an obvious reference to those who were in captivity to Satan. He did not only come to deal with sin, but with God’s prime supernatural enemy, Satan himself.<sup>36</sup> We see him confronting the evil powers that had to give way before him. What is striking is the fact that in contrast to the intricate methods used by the exorcists of that time, Jesus merely uttered a simple command. These exorcisms foreshadowed Jesus’ victory over Satan on the cross.

Mark records that ‘Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God”’ (Mark 3:11). Mark also records that unclean spirit cried out, ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’ (Mark 1:24). After Christ directly and openly rebuked the spirit, Mark says that the people were amazed, so that

they debated among themselves saying, 'What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him' (Mark 1:27). The terrified response of the demons was to Christ's unique authority.

He sent out his twelve disciples to both preach about and demonstrate the presence of the kingdom through healings, exorcisms, and raising the dead. His presence was proof that the kingdom had come. He claimed to be the one who had entered the house of the strong man. He was the one who bound him and who freely plundered his possessions (Matthew 12:22–29). It was at the cross that Jesus, having defeated Satan, in some way tied him up. In other words, the binding of the strong man does not refer to the individual Christian's confrontation with the devil or demons, it refers to a historic, unique, once for all event that took place on the cross. On the cross Jesus atoned for the sins of the world and defeated Satan and bound him. As we are beneficiaries of the atonement, so we are beneficiaries of Satan's defeat. As we do not have to apply the atonement personally, so we do not have to bind Satan personally. It has been done, once for all. We are to live in the light of what Christ did for us.

As a consequence, God gave Jesus absolute authority both in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:16f., Ephesians 1:21f). It was on that basis he gave his disciples authority to make disciples of all nations. In other words, to plunder Satan's kingdom through the church's evangelistic outreach. What is important to note is that Jesus never cast out territorial spirits or attributed the resistance of Nazareth or Jerusalem to such entities.<sup>37</sup> Neither is there evidence that he instructed his disciples to expel territorial spirits or to bind the demons. He told them simply to make disciples of all nations on the basis of the authority that was already his. In this connection Robert Lescelius notes, 'Christ has already vanquished Satan. It is his work to bind Satan, not ours. Ours is simply to preach the Gospel' (2 Corinthians 4:5).<sup>38</sup> This is true even in the debated longer ending of Mark. Our work is not to reclaim territory, but to proclaim the good news. It is in the midst of the world under the control of the evil one that we are commanded to proclaim the Lordship of Christ and to invite all people to submit to him, to be reconciled to him. Thus the authority Jesus gave his followers was connected to evangelism, making disciples.

Acts shows how this authority was exercised as the Holy Spirit empowered the Church to spread the gospel from Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, to Rome, the capital of the Gentiles. Luke records an activity of Satan with each new advance of the gospel (Acts 5, 13, 16, 19, 1 Thessalonians 2:18). He can be seen behind the persecution and opposition of the religious leaders. What is again significant is that in spite of satanic opposition, there is no description about the inner workings of the demonic world. The church did not engage in spiritual mapping, prayer walks or any strategic level spiritual warfare tactics.

When they faced opposition, the church met together in prayer. Those prayer meetings stressed the Sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ. Even the conspiracy to put Jesus Christ to death was not something just motivated by the devil, 'They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (Acts 4:28). Nothing is said about Satan, who obviously was behind the Jewish leaders' opposition to the preaching of Christ. Why? Because that would have been totally irrelevant in the light of our Lord's victory over Satan and all the powers of darkness.

They had no alternative but to give way in the face of the preaching of the gospel. The gates of Hell cannot resist the onslaught of a church that proclaims the gospel. Again Lescelius reminds us that, 'We do not have to tell Satan he has been overpowered. We simply must act like it! Evangelism does not involve commanding Satan to remove his blindness.'<sup>39</sup>

## **Paul teaches and Spiritual Warfare**

One cannot deal with the subject of Spiritual Warfare without reference to the apostle Paul. Perhaps he more than any other writer in the New Testament gives us the most insight into the spiritual powers. It is not unreasonable to assume that Paul must have been familiar with the intertestamental literature. It is important to see how much of this popular belief was accepted by Paul. Clinton Arnold observes: 'What the apostle Paul has to say about the powers of darkness should be formative for our thinking as Christians. Paul's teaching on the powers should shape and refine our world view.'<sup>40</sup>

To understand Paul's position on the powers of darkness, we have to begin with his understanding of Christ's complete and absolute victory over them. Without this perspective one will not understand his teaching on the powers of darkness. Nor will we understand his practice. Here is the starting point of understanding Paul's view of the powers of darkness.

Although Paul wrote extensively about the powers of darkness, there is no hint that he was influenced by popular Jewish beliefs that developed during the intertestamental period. He used the terms 'principalities [archai] and authorities [exousiai]' with reference to both good and evil angels. However, in contrast to the teaching popular at that time, Paul showed no interest in knowing the names of demons or their precise authority. Neither does he give information about their respective ranks and orders. For Paul '... the Lord Jesus Christ alone [is] the source of the believers' authority over the powers of darkness'.<sup>41</sup>

How do they influence the world? We learn very little from Paul. He views Satan as the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4). However, he never connected the powers of darkness with any specific country or territory. Arnold points out that, '... for Paul, it was not a matter of great importance for a believer to identify precisely the evil angel wielding the supreme authority over a territory in the demonic hierarchy. What Paul stressed is the recognition that there are powerful demonic emissaries who attack the Church and hinder its mission and that they can be overcome only through reliance on the power of God.'<sup>42</sup>

For Paul, the matter was quite clear; when God raised Jesus from the dead he gave him complete authority over everything, including the powers of darkness (Ephesians 1:15-23). Christ's death and resurrection deprived the evil forces of any effective power against himself or those joined to him. Before the cross, the powers were able to maintain a Kingdom and hold humanity in slavery. The cross changed all that. It was at the cross that Christ defeated Satan, disarmed him and gave ample evidence of his defeat by redeeming people from captivity (Colossians 2:15). Just as God delivered Israel from slavery, Christ has rescued believers from Satan and the powers of evil (Colossians 1:12-13).

This does not mean that Paul underestimated Satan's ability to hinder his mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In Acts we see, for example the opposition he faced

in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9). Later, in his letter to the Thessalonians, he specifically states; ‘Satan hindered us’ (1 Thessalonians 2:18). However, he does not explain in what way Satan hindered him. Even when he states, ‘We are not ignorant of his [the devil’s] schemes’ (2 Corinthians 2:11) there is no list or description of Satan’s schemes. The clear emphasis is not what Satan is doing but on doing what we are commanded to do.

As far as unbelievers are concerned, he associated supernatural beings with non-Christian religions (1 Corinthians 10:20–21). Unbelievers live under the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:12), they are held captive by Satan to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26, Ephesians 2), he has blinded their minds to the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:4).

In the light of this, what strategy did Paul adopt to deal with these demonic forces that held unbelievers in bondage? In contrast to the super apostles in the Corinthian church, Paul did not use the weapons of the world. The weapons he used were spiritual. They were so powerful that they could demolish strongholds. The strongholds were not literal territories ruled by demons, but Satan’s lies and deception that captivate the minds of unbelievers. It is through the preaching of the gospel that every thought is taken captive. In this connection Riddlebarger insists: ‘From my reading of Scripture, the best method of binding Satan is still the preaching of the gospel (Luke 10:18, Revelation 20:1–3)’.<sup>43</sup> Alan Morrison concurs: ‘There is ... no need to pray demons out of geographical areas in order to “reclaim the territory for Christ”. It is over unregenerate men and women’s hearts that Satan now reigns, not over plots of land where they live: the greatest weapon by far, in this instance, is the good old fashioned [but never outdated] gospel of Jesus Christ.’<sup>44</sup>

In the face of paganism with its idolatrous practices motivated by the powers of darkness, Paul never refers to the territorial spirits nor does he attribute power to them. From the moment he and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey, Paul preached and taught the gospel. He did not do prayer walks or first cast out and bind territorial spirits. In Pisidian Antioch we are told that, ‘When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region’ (Acts 13:48). At Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, he continued to preach the Good News (Acts 14:7). At Athens where it distressed him to see the city filled with idols, we see ‘Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus Christ and the resurrection’ (Acts 17:18b).

At Ephesus, a city steeped in the occult, we are told that Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8). It was in this city after they believed that we read that, ‘Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power’ (Acts 19:18–20). It is striking that Paul said his mission was ‘to open their [the Gentiles] eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me’ (Acts 26:18). How did Paul turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God? Through the preaching of the gospel. It is not possible to deal with Paul’s understanding of the

powers of darkness without looking at his teaching on the spiritual armour in Ephesians 6:10ff.

## **Paul's understanding of the Spiritual armour**

When we come to Ephesians 6:10–18 it is important to note that Paul was not dealing with a different subject. The very phrase with which he introduces this passage, translated 'Finally', shows that it serves to bring Paul's previous discussion to a conclusion. In fact, one will not understand the spiritual armour unless one puts it in the context of Paul's discussion. Much of the confusion regarding the spiritual armour is the result of taking this passage out of its context.

In chapters one to three Paul explains the role of the Church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, in implementing God's plan to unite all things, in heaven and on earth, in Christ (Ephesians 1:9f). In other words, through the Church, God has planned to restore the whole of creation cursed through sin. The church is God's new society, the kingdom, the new creation, which is the sign to the principalities and authorities of the salvation accomplished in Christ.

Supporters of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare argue that Ephesians 3:10 teaches that the Church must proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the principalities and powers by asserting his authority over the demonic forces hindering his work. But a careful study of this passage will show that this is not the correct interpretation. The key verb 'should be made known' is passive. Instead of active involvement in warfare against the spiritual powers, the very existence of the Church testifies to the authority of Christ as Head over all principalities and powers and the realization of salvation despite anything they can do. As Dr Jerry Breshears puts it: 'The work of God's grace in calling out a people for himself, making Jews and Gentiles fellow heirs of the promise, demonstrates to the powers that they are powerless to destroy the work of God even in their own realm.'<sup>45</sup>

Having dealt with that, Paul shows how those who belong to this new society are to live. For example, from chapter 4:17, he shows how this works itself out in our personal behaviour and in chapters 5 and 6, in marriage, family, and work. Every part of our lives must reflect God's new society created in Christ. It is in this context that Paul deals with the spiritual armour. The point Paul makes is that as we live in this way we will be up against powerful forces that try to tempt us, deceive us, confuse us and cause us to sin.

In other words the battle takes place in the midst of our daily lives. It is not something separate from the whole context of daily living. While recognising the reality of demonic activities, nevertheless it should be stated that spiritual warfare is not about confronting the occult and casting out demons, but about living in obedience to the Word of God. It is woven into our everyday lives. This means is that every time we aim to obey the Lord we are involved in a spiritual battle. We see this for example in the fourth chapter where Paul writes, 'In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold' (Ephesians 4:26–27). As Morrison states: '... the footholds he envisages are the various sins and sinful situations into which we can so easily fall, such as lying (4:25,15a), a lack of kindness, compassion and forgiveness (4:32), the merest hint of sexual immorality, uncleanness or covetousness (5:3,5), drunkenness (5:18), the wrong choice of

associates (5:6ff.), failure to discern false doctrine (4:14), a lack of humility and submission (4:2, 5:21), and the fostering of sectarianism or divisiveness (4:3–6).<sup>46</sup>

It is in this situation that we need our spiritual armour. When we live in obedience we are in effect doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. In other words, we are witnessing to the Kingdom of God in this present age. Thus it is wrong to interpret spiritual warfare as binding demons, rebuking the devil and casting him out. It is significant that Paul gives no hint or encouragement that we should discern the hierarchies. The battle of Ephesians six is not territorial but personal. Furthermore, as Breshears remarks: 'Extending the armour imagery in Ephesians 6:12–17 to praying against demons falls on two fundamental accounts: (1) the armour is primarily defensive resistance, not offensive praying against; (2) prayer is the confident attitude of believers that God's power will be sufficient for them to stand against the wiles of the enemy'.<sup>47</sup>

James emphasis the same point when he writes, 'Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (James 4:7). Scott Souza makes the point that 'Submitting to God and resisting the Devil are equivalent concepts'.<sup>48</sup> He further points out that in the context, 'setting aside lust and pride is the proper means of submitting to God, and since submission to God is equivalent to resisting the Devil, he is to be resisted by the same setting aside of lust and pride'.<sup>49</sup> Peter warns, 'Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith' (1 Peter 5:8–9). Clearly, we resist him not by rebuking him, binding him, but by standing firm in the faith, persevering and remaining self-controlled and alert.

What about the spiritual armour? As we have seen, Mark Bubeck turns the spiritual armour into a prayer formula where believers are urged to pray the protection of the armour for each member of their family every day.<sup>50</sup> Some take the armour literally so that upon rising in the morning, one visualises oneself being kitted out with a real suit of armour in a ritual exercise. Rebecca Brown in her book 'He came to set the Captives Free' tells of a visit she received from an angel who revealed that the reason we cannot see the spiritual armour is because it is spiritual and is put on our spirit body. As we put it on we must say: 'Father, would you please put your complete armour on me now. I ask and thank you for it in the name of Jesus'.<sup>51</sup>

What exactly is the spiritual armour? Bearing the context in mind, the spiritual armour protects us from Satan's attacks as we seek to live in obedience to God. We notice that there are six items of armour. As the literal armour covered the vital parts of the soldier's body, so the spiritual armour protects us from every kind of attack that Satan wages against the individual Christian. That is why Christians are to take the 'full armour of God'. Paul stresses that as every part of the Christian's personality is under attack, the mind, the emotions, the will etc.<sup>52</sup>

Now how do we put on this armour? How do we use this armour? Here Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes a helpful observation. He writes, 'that the order in which the pieces are mentioned is of very great importance and significance'.<sup>53</sup> The first item of armour is the clue as to how this armour is 'put on' and used. The belt used by the Roman soldier tied his whole armour together. In fact, it held his armour in place and also enabled him to move without any hindrance. What Paul was stressing is that if we are

going to stand against the attacks of Satan, what we need more than anything else is truth. Lloyd-Jones asserts that: 'Without it we are completely lost. It means to have a settled conviction with regard to the truth ... there must be no lack of clarity ... and that means nothing less than that we should know whom we have believed, and we should know what we believe'.<sup>54</sup> It is truth that will enable us to use the other items of armour. What truth? The truth of what we believe, the truth of the gospel. Unless we know the truth, we will be vulnerable to Satan's attacks.

Paul wanted the Ephesians to understand that Satan attacks us from all sides. Thus each item of armour refers to a specific kind of attack he had in mind. For example, Lloyd-Jones points out that the breastplate protected the Roman soldier's vital organs, the heart, the liver, stomach etc. These organs are used in the Bible to symbolise the inner being of the person, the so-called psychological. Lloyd-Jones therefore interprets the breastplate of righteousness as a protection against Satan's attacks on the Christian's conscience, the emotions, affections and will.<sup>55</sup> What this specifically means, for example, is that there are times when Satan brings accusations against us in our conscience. He points to our failures and weaknesses. The result is that we lose our joy and our assurance of salvation. How do we deal with this? We take the breastplate of righteousness. This is the righteousness that is from God. It is not our righteousness. We do not rely on our works or achievements. We remind ourselves that we are covered with the righteousness of Christ given to us freely by his grace through faith.

In other words, putting on the armour refers to the application of biblical truth concerning who we are in Christ. We do not put on the armour in some sort of ritualistic prayer or on a spiritual body. Putting on the armour is standing on the truth and applying the truth of our identity in Christ and our resources in him. Here is really a truth confrontation.

## **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, the position taken in this evaluation is that any teaching must be tested by Scripture alone. This has always been the standpoint taken by historic evangelicalism. From this stance one can come to no other conclusion than that the Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare teaching lacks scriptural support. When scripture is referred to, invariably the texts are taken out of context, for example Old Testament references applicable in a particular situation are taken as normative for Christians, sometimes on the basis of nothing more than a so-called 'prophetic word'. More often than not, the only justification for a course of action is pragmatism, i.e., that it works. In addition, anecdotal evidence is heavily drawn on which the Christian community is expected to accept without much documentation. Wayne Detzler asserts that, 'most of the literature available on spiritual warfare seems preoccupied with minimal references to Scripture and maximum reference to experiences'.<sup>56</sup> And John H Armstrong comments that, '... this teaching must be impressed upon Scripture, for Scripture clearly does not teach it. This is done through relating personal experiences and then drawing logical conclusions from them ... In this way, Scripture is not the authority of this teaching, rather personal experience is.'<sup>57</sup>

In addition, this teaching also raises other serious concerns:—

In the first place, fundamental to the methodology is the belief in the power of the spoken word as promoted by the Word of Faith movement leaders like Kenneth Hagin,

Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn. To attribute power to words is akin to magic and superstition.

Secondly, this teaching lacks historical perspective. The impression is given that spiritual warfare is a truth that has only recently been revealed or recovered from the ancient church. This is, of course quite incorrect. There is a wealth of literature on spiritual warfare available that is insightful and Scriptural. One just needs to think of that massive volume of William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, dating back to 1655. Dating back to 1652 we have, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* by Thomas Brooks. More recent we have two volumes of *The Christian Soldier* by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Thirdly, this teaching, contrary to its intended motive, hinders evangelism. The focus moves from sharing the gospel with unbelievers to the involved procedure of mapping, prayer walks etc. This holds the church captive from carrying out its function of evangelism until it discovers the correct spiritual formula for neutralising Satan's power. Wayne Detzler notes that it, 'Turns the task of evangelism into a magical confrontation with demonic forces'.<sup>58</sup> There is also a danger that procedure, even prayer, becomes a substitute for evangelism.

Another concern is the way prayer has become highly organised. It is not enough for a small group within the church or even for a group of local churches to get together to simply pray for change and revival. Prayer is organised into local, regional, national and international networks. It is also surrounded with a certain mystique, as only special people with insight can pray effectively. As we saw, Chuck Pierce believes that it is 'Apostolic prayer that unlocks regions'. The ordinary Christian must rely on the experts. Furthermore the focus of prayer moves from the sovereign God and his Son to whom he has given all authority, to Satan and his demons. Gerry Breshears voices his concern: 'I am ... troubled when prayer stops being family fellowship and becomes warfare weapons. Christian prayer brings communion and intimacy with God as well as unity to the body. It is never a weapon of warfare against some person, ideology or demon.'<sup>59</sup>

Of course we long for revival and the total transformation of our society and the world. That is our best hope. But we cannot organise revival. That is the sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us so and history confirms this to be true. So, what must we do? We do not need to discover the schemes of the devil. That is irrelevant. We must do what the people of God have always done; we must repent and seek God's face. Like the psalmist in Psalm 85 we must cry to God; 'Restore us again, O God our Saviour, and put away your displeasure toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations? Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?' (Psalm 85:4-6). Or like the prophet Isaiah who prayed: 'Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble' (Isaiah 64:1). Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones commenting on this verse in Isaiah encourages us: 'Seek him, stir yourself up to call upon his name. Take hold upon him, plead with him as your Father, as your Maker, as your Potter, as your Guide, as your God. Plead his own promises. Cry unto him and say, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down".'<sup>60</sup>

*This article first appeared in the South African Baptist Journal of Theology.*

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