

Issues in Charismatic Theology

Spiritual Warfare

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1. Introduction

Christianity today is filled with speculation and outright wrong teaching about spiritual warfare. This confusion has proliferated from the influence of the Charismatic Movement. The very term “spiritual warfare” was first used in published material by Charismatic author Michael Harper in 1970. Since then the term has become common for a wide range of biblical and anti-biblical practices.

Teachings that are inconsistent with the Scripture must be corrected and even speculations about the spirit realm should be avoided also. 2 Timothy 2:23 commands us to refuse to listen to foolish and ignorant speculations since they produce quarrels. 1 Timothy 1:4 teaches us that these speculations do not further God’s work of faith and are thus unprofitable. To engage in guesswork about the spirit realm or about any doctrine of the faith is simply wrong.

The Charismatic Movement has proliferated such speculation and errors regarding Satan due to the priority that is put upon individual experiences. As experiences are reported, they are too readily accepted and added to the growing sum of accepted knowledge on the subject. Our perspective on spiritual warfare must come from God’s revealed Word and the Scripture must interpret our experience. Too often experiences are interpreting the Scripture.

There are two basic errors that are being advocated today regarding spiritual warfare and result in a variety of problems. The first error involves the means of spiritual warfare and the second is regarding the timing of Christ’s victory over the devil.

As to how we conduct spiritual warfare, the New Testament epistles teach us that our strategy of spiritual warfare against Satan is not to seek him out but to be on the alert, not to attack the devil but to resist the devil (1 Peter 5:8-9; James 4:7; Ephesians 6:11), particularly as we are tempted to indulge our fleshly desires. The rhetoric of the Charismatic Movement is overflowing with rebukes, commands, strategies, and bindings of the devil.

As to the timing of Christ’s victory over Satan, Christ will triumph over the devil in the future. Presently the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Satan will not be bound until the millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:2-3) and will not be completely defeated until the final judgment (Revelation 20:10).

There are a number of ways that Charismatic leaders teach about the spirit realm that are sheer speculation and often outright contradictory to biblical truth. The following are the most common teachings about the forces of Satan and spiritual warfare that is being harms a great many churches. These teachings have become so widely accepted that even non-Charismatic churches have been frequently involved with some or all of these errors.

2. Casting out demons

During Christ's ministry on earth He often cast out demons (Mt. 4:24, 8:16, 8:28-34, 9:32-34, 12:22, 12:43-45, 15:21-28, 17:14-21; Mark 1:23-34, 3:11, 3:22-30, 5:1-20, 7:24-30, 9:14-29; Luke 4:33-41, 6:18, 7:21, 8:2, 8:26-40, 9:37-43, 11:14-26, 13:10-21). The apostles and their associates also had the ability to cast out demons (Mt. 10:7-8; Acts 5:12-16, 8:7, 19:11-20). This is similar to other miraculous abilities that God gave to His appointed messengers. Just as Jesus and the apostles were able to bring divine healing, so they were also able to supernaturally cast out unclean spirits.

God gave this unique ability that some had to cast out demons, like the ability that some had to bring divine healing and other miracles, for the same reason, in order to validate the messenger and therefore the revelation which God was giving. As with other affirming signs, the ability to cast out demons ceased with the age of the apostles and with the close of new revelation from God.

This does not mean that God is not able to overcome demonization today. He most certainly does so directly as people turn to Him by grace through faith and away from idols (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9). He simply has chosen to limit this unique ability to cast out evil spirits to His New Testament messengers of revelation.

Furthermore, it is mistaken to think that demons were cast out of people in order to free them from bondage to Satan. What frees people from the domain of darkness and service to Satan is faith in Christ. Simply being freed from the control of a particular demon or demons does not bring salvation (Matthew 12:42-45). Christ and the apostles did not cast out demons in order to free people from the kingdom of darkness but rather they did so in order to demonstrate the Lord's power over the kingdom of darkness. Only receiving the gospel of salvation can we be freed from bondage to Satan (Ephesians 2:1-10).

Just like the miracles of healing foreshadowed the day when God will redeem our body from the judgment of God in Genesis 3, and just like the gift of tongues foreshadowed the reconciliation of the languages from the judgment of God in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel, the ministry of casting out demons foreshadowed the future day when the devil would be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). This was done to authenticate God's instruments of revelation and since revelation is no longer being added to the church today, there is no longer any need for these verifying signs. Resisting the evil one is dependent upon our relationship with Christ in humble faith (James 4:6-8).

3. Binding Satan

It is common for Charismatics to teach that we should bind Satan based on Matthew 12:29. Matthew 12:29 is a historical illustration of Christ's power over Satan. It is not a metaphor instructing believers to practice verbal control over Satan in order to affect change in individuals. While Christ has all authority over Satan (Matthew 28:18), Satan presently is not bound. This awaits the millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:2) and ultimately Satan's destiny in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10).

In addition to mistaking the timing for Satan's binding, this teaching also mistakes the personnel for Satan's binding. Believers will not be used by God to bind Satan. This is a sovereign act of God in which He sends an angel from heaven to bind Satan (Revelation 20:1-2). Therefore, the idea that believers can remove Satan and his demons from their influence by binding Satan or even praying to God for Satan's binding is unfounded and misunderstands Matthew 12:29. In the present age our role is to resist the devil (James 4:7).

4. Rebuking the devil

Within Charismatic churches, Satan is regularly rebuked and commanded. Even Wayne Grudem, one of the least radical of the Charismatic theologians, includes a section in his *Systematic Theology* titled "Jesus gives all believers authority to rebuke demons and command them to leave." This basis for this claim is found in Luke 9:1, "He called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases." So as with their view regarding divine power to miraculously heal diseases, the same Charismatic assumption is that this statement is meant for believers today.

However, the Scripture never instructs us to rebuke the devil or his demons. If rebuking demons were useful in ministry we should expect to find it encouraged, particularly since the Scripture was given to make us adequate and equip us (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We would further expect a greater degree of holiness among Charismatic churches where Satan is being so opposed.

Rebuking the devil is the sole prerogative of Jesus as an expression of His Lordship and authority over the spirit realm. Believers are only taught to rebuke a brother who has fallen into sin (Matthew 18:15; 1 Timothy 5:20). This is why Michael the archangel in Jude 9 responded to Satan with "The Lord rebuke you." We do not resist the demonic forces by speaking to them, but by standing firm in our faith and not yielding to sin.

Many people are led astray by such teaching that promises instantaneous victory over a problem by a timely rebuke of the devil. This misleads people from the character building process of endurance. This is why God allows us to suffer affliction rather than provide immediate relief (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, James 1:2-4). Actively resisting by faith the schemes of the devil is a part of the process of our growth in Christ.

5. Inheriting demons through our ancestors

Charismatic teachers will sometimes believe that the cause of alleged demon activity among Christians is due the demons that have been inherited from an ancestor who practiced some form of witchcraft or lived an immoral life. If a parent's or grandparent's curse or alleged occult power is not specifically uncovered and removed by renouncing it, a Christian can be demonically oppressed by these past curses.

Neil Anderson, a widely read contemporary author on spiritual warfare, incorporates the following words into his recommended prayer for adopted children, whom he considers to be extremely vulnerable to demonic influence, "I renounce the sins of this child's ancestors and all curses that have been passed on from generation to generation....I renounce all satanic sacrifices that have been made on behalf of (name) and any claim of ownership that Satan may have."

Charles Kraft, professor emeritus at Fuller Seminary, wrote in 2016, "Many people have individuals in their ancestry who have given themselves to Satan through participation in occult organizations or through dedications to the gods or spirits of their ancestors. Family spirits and other spirits are regularly passed down through bloodlines. I would estimate that well over half the people I have cast demons out of have had at least one inherited demon."

Scriptural proof for this view is claimed from Exodus 20:5, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me," and Jeremiah 32:18, "[God] repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them." While the punishment of moral decay and rebellion can also be reaped by a person's descendants, this is far from teaching that demons are being passed along the family line or even that some families will be more prone to direct satanic attack. It is wrong to assume these verses teach that iniquity is brought to descendants because it is their inheritance. Iniquity is rather found because each successive generation decides to follow in the footsteps of their parents. It has nothing to do with demonic oppression, curses, satanic sacrifices, etc. God does not punish a son for his father's sin (Ezekiel 18:19-20).

Certainly the consequences of our sins can impact our children. But the Bible does not teach that demons are passed on along the family line. This is part of occult theology that has been accepted by some Christians. The New Testament sanctification process does not take into account which family we come from. Furthermore, the Bible does not recognize occult sin as a special category of sin that has not been dealt with by the cross of Christ. Everyone is born under the authority of Satan (Colossians 1:13) and all unbelievers have Satan as their father (John 8:42-44) and Satan working through them (Ephesians 2:2), not just those who have some occult background. Since God delivered all His children from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, we all enjoy freedom from our bondage to Satan for "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

6. Inheriting demons through inanimate objects

Another Charismatic perspective on evil spirits is that objects can be inhabited by demons, particularly if they were used in pagan rituals or occult practices. Many teach that if we possess an idol we may unknowingly pick up a demon through those objects and to protect ourselves, the artifacts must be destroyed. But this goes beyond religious artifacts. One example is Pat Robertson on the 700 Club in 2013 told viewers about buying clothes from Goodwill that it “ain’t going to hurt anything to rebuke any spirits that happened to have attached themselves to those clothes.”

An article entitled, “These Objects May Be Opening Your Home to Demons” from *Charisma* in March of 2019 encouraged the reader to “discern with the Holy Spirit” items left in your home by others, items from former friends, and heirlooms (unless you know the spirituality of your ancestors). Demons are not just said to be attached to religious items but potentially anything in our home. Discernment questions such as “what feeling does the item bring forth?” and “do you have a ‘check’ in your spirit.” We should “pray and bring a mature friend or Christian to help you.”

It is argued that Israel was commanded to destroy idols (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:25-26). However God commanded the destroying of idols because He did not want the people of Israel to participate in the idolatry of the surrounding nations, not because demons inhabit them. This belief goes beyond speculation to outright error.

Paul specifically wrote in 1 Corinthians about how we should conduct ourselves with items that have been used in idolatrous practices. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 notes that idols are in and of themselves nothing, having no intrinsic significance. 1 Corinthians 10:25-27 gives us the freedom to purchase meat without investigating whether or not it was used in idol worship. We are specifically instructed to not worry about the history of an item since God is the owner of everything in the earth.

This instruction by Paul would hold true for other items that may have been used in paganism. If meat that was specifically used in idol worship can be eaten then there is no issue with possessing any object for fear of an evil spirit. If an artifact had been used in idolatry, it is clear that Paul does not consider it to be inherently a spiritual danger for the believer.

According to 1 Corinthians 10:28, idols only have meaning as people assign them such. Idol worship is evil and demonic (1 Corinthians 10:20) and we should avoid even the perception of idol worship. If a person considers us to be worshipping by participating in a practice or by possessing an artifact then we must refrain in order to not give the impression that we are serving something other than the true God (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). But the item itself has no power and is not a haven for demons. If it were, then Paul would have exhorted us to refrain from all meat sacrificed to idols, not just to refrain if it were to cause others to stumble by observing our practice.

7. Demons necessarily causing us to sin or come as a result of sin

Charismatic leaders routinely link specific demons to sin practices. Many even go so far as to giving them names, such as Anger, Lust, Liar, Homosexuality and Unbelief. Sometimes the names are reflective of psychology, such as Non-acceptance and Self-hate. Other times the names are other names for Satan, like Lucifer, Apollyon, and Beelzebub. Some teachers give names based on compulsive habits or sin practices and other teachers command any demons present to manifest themselves.

However, according to the Scripture, demonization is not caused by sin, nor is it linked to perpetuating sin. Nowhere does the Bible describe sin being dealt with by any type of confrontation with demons. This is because people are victims of demonic suffering, just as they are victims of physical illness and even death. Interestingly, the demonized are included in the lists of the sick whom Jesus healed (Matthew 4:23-25; cf. Luke 6:18; 7:21; 8:2; 9:42; 13:11-13). Jesus compassionately healed the demonized just as He did other sick people.

The result of this deliverance was relief and the restoration of mental and physical capabilities. It did not lead directly to moral improvement except as it testified to Christ's power, as with any other type of miracle. Without faith and repentance, those temporarily healed will one day suffer a more painful destiny. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6) by overcoming sin.

When we sin it is wrong to believe "the devil made me do it." The devil certainly tempts us but the New Testament never connects demonization to moral evil in the person who has the demon. Inhabiting demons do not cause patterns of sins and are not the result of the sins of others. Satan may influence people but they remain responsible for their sin. Prime examples are Job, Judas Iscariot (John 13:27) and Ananias (Acts 5:3-4). At best we can only say that as with other types of suffering, the afflicted may be more likely to yield to temptation.

Jesus did not cast out demons to overcome sin but to compassionately alleviate suffering and to demonstrate His power over the evil one. Suffering is often not directly caused by sin (cf. John 9:1-3). Jesus rather exposed and reprovved sin, inviting people to faith. In this respect, spiritual warfare is really involving repentance from sin. The Bible never portrays moral evil as a demon that needs to be cast out.

To minister to people's sin problems by addressing demons is to fall for a satanic deception. Instead of giving attention to the real problem of yielding to the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:16), Christians are being deceived into ignoring their moral responsibility to obey God. God's call to repentance is lost in the fruitless search to oppose the right demon. The real work of the devil is to distract God's people away from repentance for sin and to discover the causes for bad things. The desire to blame someone else, and in Eve's case blaming Satan, for our sin was part of the fall of man (Genesis 3:12-13).

8. Defeating territorial spirits

Charismatics have speculated about reasons why some countries have seen fewer conversions than others have. The founder of so-called “Third Wave” theology, C. Peter Wagner of Fuller Seminary’s School of World Mission, viewed the defeating of territorial spirits as central to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. He suggested that territorial spirits could bind certain countries like Japan, which have had an historical low response rate to the gospel.

This perspective has grown rampant among most Charismatic circles. The April 1990 issue of *Charisma* magazine featured cover stories on how to defeat territorial spirits. Included were articles entitled, “Winning the Battle for Your Neighborhood: How you can drive away the demon forces now dominating the streets where you live.” with testimonies of how ministry is ineffective until people identified these spiritual forces and forced them to give up their territory. They claimed this resulted in the outbreak of spiritual revival.

Wagner advocated spiritual mapping to research occult practices, past sins, dedication to a particular god, etc. and thus uncover which demonic ruler has claimed a certain area. He then asked God to reveal the names of these demons that God allegedly does through strong impressions, visions or a prophetic word. As these names are discerned, prayer is offered against these powers by name to bind the demons and weaken their power. Advocates of this strategy have formed the “Spiritual Warfare Network.”

The biblical evidence to support territorial spirits is claimed from Ephesians 6:12 and Daniel 10:13. While Ephesians 6:12 may show there is organization in the demonic realm and Daniel 10:13 and 10:20 may even depict a demon prince over Persia and Greece at that time, this is a long way from assuming that demons can interfere with God’s sovereign work of evangelism by controlling certain territory. God is saving His elect regardless of the spiritual forces by “taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name” (Acts 15:14). The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) and the truth of God’s Word will set us free (John 8:32).

It is noteworthy that God sovereignly sent two angels in response to Daniel’s humble prayer of confession in Daniel 10, in spite of the fact that Daniel was not asking for angelic assistance, and in spite of his ignorance about the existence or activities of “the prince of Persia” and “the prince of Greece.” There is never an example of or an encouragement to seek information about the work of spirits and this incident in Daniel only argues that this quest is not necessary. These types of sensationalistic pursuits can only distract from the true mission of the church.

Also, the offensive defeat of Satan and demons is awaiting the end times (Revelation 20). This defeat of Satan is accomplished by the Lord and does not depend on us. The idea that we can run territorial demons out of town is erroneous in the timing of Satan’s defeat and is erroneous regarding our involvement in Satan’s defeat.

Finally, to attempt to find out if a specific demon is in control of a region is of no value. We know there is one territorial spirit — Satan, whose territory is the entire world (1 John 5:19; 2 Corinthians 4:4). The Bible never hints that we should attempt to identify any others and pray against them. Even if we were able to run a demon out of a region, Satan remains powerful. Therefore this strategy can be regarded as fruitless.

The theology of territorial spirits is another example of Charismatic theology run amok. Once the idea that attacking the devil is embraced, then the attempt to identify demonic strongholds follows. The question of how we can know the location of demonic forces is begged.

The leap is then made that defeating spiritual forces is not only possible but is necessary for world evangelization. This is beyond speculative, it is an affront to the power of the gospel to deliver man from darkness (Romans 1:18). Unfortunately it has become hard to find Charismatics willing to denounce this perspective. Furthermore, it has gained popularity among many non-Charismatics, particularly through Christian fiction such as Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*.

9. Specific prayers for spiritual warfare

Materials on spiritual warfare often include prayers that are to be repeated out loud. These prayers differ depending on the particular sin that is being addressed. The obvious impression left by these prayers to be followed is that they have been specially designed to defeat Satan in the specific battle at hand. These prayers are seen as an important part of the formula for victory over Satan.

The reason these prayers are to be repeated out loud is, according to Neil Anderson, “God can hear your prayers, whether you pray your prayer out loud or not. But because Satan cannot read your mind, it is important that you say each prayer out loud. I’ll help you with each prayer.” Thus, it is not only necessary for us to pray to God but also to communicate to Satan as well. According to Anderson, we need to “tell Satan we really mean what we say.” Therefore we are led to think that prayer to God alone is insufficient to overcome Satan.

However, the Bible does not encourage us to communicate with Satan. It is highly significant that the Scripture, which was written for the very purpose of our sanctification, says absolutely nothing to advance this approach of praying out loud. We can only conclude that it is unnecessary, and perhaps counterproductive, for true spiritual warfare.

There is no cryptic formula or special words that unlock God’s power against Satan. The teaching of Romans 8:26 is that the Holy Spirit will intercede for us because we do not know how to pray as we should. Beyond praying the “right” words, we don’t even have to pray the right thing. The Holy Spirit’s ministry is to intercede on our behalf and God is not waiting for us to figure out how to word our prayers.

10. True Spiritual Warfare

Our spiritual warfare is on a totally different plane from the speculative, superstitious practices that are being advanced by contemporary Charismatic spiritual warfare teachers. Our warfare is in the realm of temptation to sin. Not all temptation is the direct work of the devil. James 1:14-15 teaches that our own sinful nature tempts us to sin. We fall into temptation because our flesh is predisposed to please itself (cf. James 4:1-2).

Beyond our sinful nature as humans, Satan has built a world system to make the most of our weaknesses. He is the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and he works through the tools of the world, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16). In this way Satan moves to deceive us into sin.

It is important to be reminded that as Christians, we have overcome the evil one based upon the Spirit of God dwelling within us (1 John 2:13-14; 4:4). God’s power is greater than Satan and His power to overcome the devil is seen in our salvation from the kingdom of darkness. Not only is our ultimate deliverance secure but presently, no temptation has overtaken us but such as is common to man and God is faithful, who will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1 Corinthians 10:13).

While Satan is our adversary who seeks to devour us through temptation (1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Peter 5:8), our response to the adversary is to resist him, firm in our faith (1 Peter 5:9). As we grow in our faith in Christ we will grow in our ability to resist the devil and thus see this positional victory over Satan through Christ become more and more manifested in our daily lives.

11. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is not one example in the entire Bible of a saved person being under direct satanic oppression or curse which has been broken by casting out a demon, by binding Satan, by rebuking Satan, by renouncing Satan, by calling a demon by his name, by repeating the words of a written prayer or any other superstitious practice.

Unsaved people are freed from the power of Satan by the gospel of Christ. Through redemption they are permanently transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13-14).

When Satanic forces attacked Paul, he did not rebuke, bind or charge the messenger of Satan to do anything (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). He simply prayed to the Lord. He did not command or claim victory, but rather he patiently entrusted himself to the Lord by considering God’s purposes to be righteous. When Paul’s ministry was thwarted by Satan he did not rebuke him (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18), just like even Michael the archangel did not rebuke Satan (Jude 9). It is foolishness to think that we can command Satan when only God can.

We ought to follow the example of Paul and trust the Lord to take care of the demonic forces in His way and in his timing. The Lord is certainly able to defeat demonic forces as He sees fit and since He does not need our help, has not given us instructions on how to join Him in this.

How should we respond in spiritual warfare? The New Testament does not encourage mystical formulas or instruct us to say the right words to Satan. The equipment for spiritual warfare is available to every Christian, for it is the basic Christian life of knowing and prayerfully applying the truth of God's Word (Ephesians 6:13-18). By submitting to God, we resist the devil and stand firm in our faith (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9). In the practice of knowing and yielding to the revealed will of God in the Scripture, the devil will flee from us. If we fail in this area it does not matter what we say to the powers of darkness.

The irony of the Charismatic emphasis on spiritual warfare is that it feeds the very approach of the devil, to confuse and mislead man about the truth of God. The emphasis on experiences to discover spiritual truth has led to a corresponding de-emphasis on the truth of the Scripture. The willingness to embrace extra-biblical revelation as truth has led to the vast spread of Charismatic spiritual warfare experts. Both outright error and rank speculation abounds regarding the spiritual forces of darkness.