"What is spiritual warfare?"

One of the more popular topics in contemporary Christian interest in the powers of darkness is "spiritual warfare." As Arnold notes, "Many Christians have come to think of spiritual warfare as a specialized form of ministry—exorcism, deliverance ministry, or certain types of intercession."[1] These ministries place a significant focus on confrontations with evil spirits ("power encounters"). Episodes in the New Testament where Jesus, his disciples, and other apostles (e.g., Paul) cast out demons or challenge evil spirits are taken as template-backdrops for passages that talk about the spiritual war in which believers find themselves (Eph 6:10-20; 2 Cor 10:3-6). The Deuteronomy 32 worldview of the Old Testament has also recently become a point of reference for spiritual warfare ministry, specifically what is known as "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare" (SLSW):

> SLSW is indebted to the notion of territorial spirits—that is, powerful, high-ranking spirit beings that have authority over particular geographical regions of the earth. Proponents of SLSW point to a number of biblical texts and themes in their defense of territorial spirits, including the ideas that there are angelic authorities over the nations (Deut. 32:8; Ps. 82) and that the gods/idols of the nations are actually demonic entities (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5; 106:37–38). The most important text here is Daniel 10, which apparently depicts two evil spiritual beings—the "prince of Greece" and the "prince of Persia"—in battle against God's angelic forces of good, including the angel Michael. In addition to these Old Testament texts, several passages in the New Testament are cited in support of this concept (i.e., Luke 10:19; 11:20–22; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 1 Cor. 2:6–8; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:12; 1 John 5:19; Rev. 2:12; 12:7–9; 18:2).[2]

The leading figure behind SLSW for many years was C. Peter Wagner, who coined the term. Eddy and Beilby explain Wagner's approach:

> Building on the concept of demonic territorial spirits, proponents argue for the importance of several things that, together, compose the primary foci and activities of the SLSW model. First is the concept of "strategic-level" spiritual warfare itself. Wagner coined this phrase in the process of distinguishing between three levels of activity in the practice of spiritual warfare: "ground-level" (i.e., casting demons out of individual people), "occult-level" (i.e., dealing with demonic forces within Satanism, witchcraft, and other forms of "structured occultism"), and finally "strategic-level" (i.e., direct confrontation of territorial

[1] Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 19.
[2] Paul Rhodes Eddy and James K. Beilby, "Introduction," in *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 41.

> spirits that hold "cities, nations, neighborhoods, people groups, religious alliances, industries, or any other form of human society in spiritual captivity"). SLSW commonly involves "spiritual mapping," a process by which the specific territorial spirit(s) of an area is discerned and named. . . . SLSW involves focused, aggressive prayer against the territorial spirits themselves.[3]

While it's encouraging to see the Deuteronomy 32 worldview taken seriously, there are some serious flaws with defining spiritual warfare in such terms. Fundamentally, confrontation of the spirit world isn't the pattern that one sees in the New Testament in regard to the defeat of the fallen sons of God ("principalities").

As we saw in the previous chapter, the jurisdictional authority of these sons of God has been nullified by the resurrection and ascension of Christ. That reality is what frames the Great Commission—the call to reclaim the nations ("go into all the world and make disciples"). The kingdom of darkness will lose what is essentially a spiritual war of attrition, for the gates of hell will not be able to withstand the Church. This is why believers are never commanded to rebuke spirits and demand their flight in the name of Jesus.[4] It is unnecessary. Their authority has been withdrawn by the Most High. Believers are in turn commanded to reclaim their territory by recruiting the citizens in those territories for the kingdom of God.

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[3] Ibid., 41-42.

[4] SLSW advocates would object to this point, arguing (in part) that the Great Commission passage in Mark 16:9-20 includes casting out demons (Mark 16:17). Several points need to be noted in response. First, most New Testament scholars (evangelical and otherwise) believe that the original text of Mark ended at Mark 16:8. This is why many modern English translations bracket Mark 16:9-20 and include an explanatory footnote. Stein observes: " Although few scholars today argue for the authenticity of either the "shorter" or "longer ending" of Mark . . . there is continued debate over whether Mark intended to end his Gospel at 16:8. In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars were inclined to argue that 16:8 was not the intended ending of Mark. Later in that century, a reversal of this position took place. Mark was now seen as intending to end his Gospel at 16:8" (Robert H. Stein, *Mark* [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 733). The textual problems with the "long ending" of Mark (vv. 9-20) are famous and the bibliography on the issue is copious. Marcus summarizes the manuscript situation: "[Verses 9-20] are found in the overwhelming majority of manuscripts and in all major manuscript families and are attested already by Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.10.5) in 185 C.E and perhaps, even earlier, by Justin (*1 Apology* 45, around 155 C.E). But they were almost certainly not penned by Mark, nor were they the original ending of the Gospel. Matthew and Luke follow Mark's narrative closely up to 16:8, whereas beyond it they diverge radically, suggesting that their version of Mark did not contain anything subsequent to 16:8. Verses 9–20, moreover, do not exist in our earliest and best Greek manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, both of which terminate at 16:8, as do the Sinaitic Syriac, about a hundred Armenian manuscripts, the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (from 897 and 913 C.E), and all but one manuscript of the Sahidic Coptic. When verses 9–20 *do* appear, moreover, they are often separated from 16:8 by scribal signs (asterisks or obeli) or by notations that state or suggest that what follows is not found in some witnesses" (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [vol. 27A; Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009], 1088–1089). Consequently, basing any point of doctrine on the content of Mark 16:9-20 is misguided and unwise. Second, one cannot conclude from Mark 16:17 that all believers should be engaging in SLSW. Paul is clear that the gifts of tongues and healing are *not* for every believer. In fact, no supernatural gift is for every believer. They are distributed to some (1 Cor 12:27-31).

What this means in both theological and practical terms is that spiritual warfare needs to be understood in the context of the conflict between two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Already during Jesus's public ministry we see this binary opposition. Jesus himself articulated it: "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). It is no coincidence that the expulsion of demons from people and places accompanied the inauguration of the kingdom of God. As the kingdom of God grows, the kingdom of darkness shrinks and loses ground.

Jesus never commanded that his followers confront spiritual entities.[5] Instead he gave the Great Commission. A spiritual entity might be driven away, but that doesn't necessarily result in a new soul entering the kingdom of God. This latter goal is the reason Jesus gave his life and rose from the dead. The work of Christ was not about power encounters with demons. It was much more comprehensive and enduring than that. The goal was to bring Eden full circle—fulfilling God's desire to have a human family with him forever. Punishing fallen spirits does not accomplish God's original Edenic goal. Only the Great Commission accomplishes the ends to which God has been working as well as the defeat and punishment of rebellious evil spirits. The Great Commission is thus a comprehensive plan for spiritual warfare.

A careful reading of the two primary passages used to support "power encounter" spiritual warfare bears out the preceding assertion that spiritual warfare is not about confronting supernatural entities, but about the furtherance of the gospel by committed believers:

> Eph 6:10-20
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> **10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. **12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. **13** Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. **14** Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, **15** and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. **16** In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; **17** and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which

[5] It is true that the disciples had power to exorcise demons, but even in the instances when Jesus authorized exorcism the context is limited to healing personal harassment and harm. Arnold explains the point: "When Jesus spoke of giving the Seventy authority 'to overcome all the power of the enemy' (Luke 10:19), this did not extend to angelic rulers over cities and nations. This is made clear when the Seventy exclaim to the Lord with excitement, 'even the demons submit to us in your name' (Luke 10:17). They were ministering to people afflicted in various ways by demons. And this is what they continued to do after the day of Pentecost. There is no hint in the text that the Seventy were casting demons out of villages, cities, or temples." (Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 164).

is the word of God, **18** praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, **19** and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, **20** for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

In Paul's explanation of spiritual warfare to the church at Ephesus, he nowhere recommends that believers confront or admonish the supernatural rulers and powers. His list of weapons does not include exorcism against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Instead, here is what Paul considered effective in spiritual combat against the forces of darkness:

- truth (v. 14)
- righteousness (v. 14)
- the gospel (v. 15)
- faith (v. 16)
- salvation (v. 17)
- the word of God (v. 17)
- prayer (v. 18)
- perseverance (v. 18)

It is not difficult to see that, instead of power encounters, spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6 is about having persevering faith in the gospel and the word of God and living a holy, prayerful life as a follower of Jesus. The same strategy is evident in the other passage of popular reference for spiritual warfare:

2 Cor 10:3-6

3 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. **4** For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. **5** We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, **6** being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

Paul's description of how he fights the strongholds of darkness includes neither exorcism nor efforts to evict territorial spirits. There is no confrontation of supernatural powers among his personal strategy.[6] Rather, successful spiritual warfare in this passage "destroys arguments and

[6] Peter and Jude take a stance opposite of SLSW. They advocate caution with respect to evil spirits. Both writers warn their readers to not "blaspheme the glorious ones" (Jude 8; 2 Peter 2:10), beings that outrank angels. As I have written elsewhere: "The term [*doksas*] probably refers to divine beings of the council close to God's glorious presence, since Second Temple period texts describe such beings. These passages in 2 Peter and Jude speak of (human) blasphemers who rail against the glorious ones. The 2 Peter passage adds the note that angels, though greater than those human blasphemers, would not dare to do such a thing. The wording suggests some distinction

every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" and "takes every thought captive to obey Christ." In other words, spiritual warfare is being a faithful disciple who is not "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph 4:14). Spiritual warfare is about leading a life obedient to Jesus, following his obedient example for the cause of God's vision for a kingdom on earth.

While not spectacular, adherence to truth and committed discipleship is what constitutes spiritual warfare in New Testament theology. To be blunt, this is a lot harder than yelling commands in the name of Jesus at a demon (or, more frequently, into the air). As disciples, we need to prepare ourselves to avoid demonization in the form of false teaching, temptation, and sinful life patterns. Paul's characterization of spiritual warfare as adherence to the gospel and other scriptural truths, and a prayerful, persevering life of righteousness, are clear headed and on target. Being obedient disciples is what makes us fit soldiers for Christ. The mission of every Christian is to carry out the Great Commission, the means by which the kingdom of God grows and the kingdom of darkness recedes.

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between angels and 'glorious ones' in rank (and perhaps power). For example, 2 Enoch 21:3 identifies Gabriel, widely described as an archangel in biblical and other Second Temple period texts, as one of "the glorious ones of the Lord." See Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 331. I added in a footnote: "Several New Testament scholars follow this trajectory. Bauckham writes: "The term δόξαι (lit. 'glories') for angels is attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls (נכבדים).… Probably they are so called because they participate in or embody the glory of God (cf. *T. Jud.* 25:2; *T. Levi* 18:5; Heb 9:5; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.8.45)." For Second Temple parallels, see 1QH 10:8; 2 Enoch 22:7, 10; Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 9:32; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.45; T. Jud. 25:2; T. Levi 18:5. See Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 57. The Greek verb in these two passages translated "blaspheme" (*blasphēmeō*) means "to speak in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, maligns" (BDAG, 178). The point Peter and Jude are making is that even angels have enough sense to avoid speaking disrespectfully to high celestial powers. It seems quite reasonable to conclude that SLSW crosses this line and is therefore ill-advised and contrary to the teaching of Peter and Jude. SLSW advocates aren't saying "please" when they allegedly command evil spirits.