

Spiritual Warfare and Worldviews

by Paul G. Hiebert (Fall, 2000)

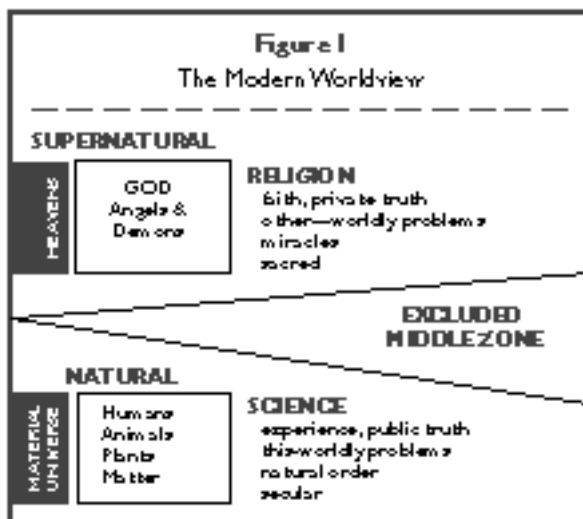
In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the Gospel as power in the lives of people, and in spiritual warfare between God and Satan. This comes as an important corrective to the earlier emphasis in many western churches on the Gospel as merely truth, and on evil as primarily human weakness. Both truth and power are central themes in the Gospel and should be in the lives of God's people. But much literature on spiritual warfare has been written by western missionaries who have been forced to question their Western denial of this-worldly spiritual realities through encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession. Too often they base their studies in experience and look for biblical texts to justify their views. They fail to examine the worldviews they use to interpret both Scripture and experience. These are hard to see because they are what we think with, not what we think about.

Different Worldviews and Spiritual Warfare

Stories of battles between good and evil, and of power encounters between good gods and evil demons are found in all religions. In Hinduism, Rama battles Ravana, in Buddhism, Buddha fights Mara, in Islam Allah wars against Shaitan, and in traditional religions tribal gods fight one another for conquest. What are some of the worldviews that shape the current Christian debate regarding the nature of spiritual warfare?

Modern Supernatural/Natural Worldview

The western worldview has been shaped since the sixteenth century by the Cartesian dualism that divides the cosmos into two realities--the supernatural world of God, angels and demons, and the natural material world of humans, animals, plants and matter. This has led to two views of spiritual warfare. First, secular materialists deny the reality of the supernatural world, and reduce reality to the natural world which can best be studied by science. For them there is no spiritual warfare, because there are no gods, angels or demons. There are only natural wars between humans, communities and nations. Christians who accept this view demythologize the Scriptures to make it fit modern secular scientific beliefs. The battle, they claim, is between good and evil in human social systems. The church is called to fight against poverty, injustice, oppression, and other evils which are due to oppressive, exploitative human systems of government, business and religion.



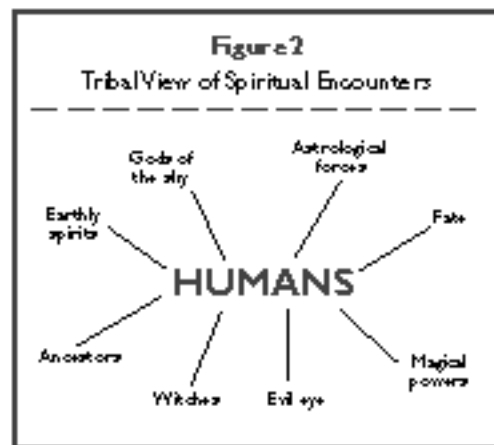
The second view of spiritual warfare emerging out of this Cartesian dualism is that God, angels and demons are involved in a cosmic battle in the heavens, but the everyday events on earth are best explained and controlled by science and technology (see figure 1). People pray to God for their salvation, but turn to modern medicine for healing and psychology for deliverance from so called demon possession, because demons exist in the heavens, not on earth. Western missionaries influenced by this dualism affirm the cosmic battle between good

and evil, but deny the realities of witchcraft, spirit possession, evil eye and magic in the cultures where they serve. Consequently they fail to provide biblical answers to the people's fears of earthly spirits and powers, and to deal with the reality of Satan's work on earth.

Tribal Worldview

For most tribal peoples ancestors, earthly spirits, witchcraft and magic are very real. The people see the earth and sky as full of beings (gods, earthly divinities, ancestors, ghosts, evil shades, humans, animals and nature spirits) that relate, deceive, bully and battle one another for power and personal gain. These beings are neither totally good nor totally evil. They help those who serve or placate them. They harm those who oppose their wishes or who neglect them or refuse to honor them. Humans must placate them to avoid terrible disasters.

Spiritual warfare in animistic societies is seen as an ongoing battle between different alliances of beings (see figure 2). For the most part these alliances are based on ethnicity and territory. The battle is not between "good" and "evil," but between "us" and "others." The gods, spirits, ancestors and people of one village or tribe are in constant battle with those of surrounding villages and tribes. When the men of one group defeat those of another, they attribute their success to the power of their gods and spirits. When they are defeated, they blame this on the weakness of their gods and spirits.



Territory plays an important role in tribal views of spiritual warfare. Gods, spirits and ancestors reside in specific places or objects, and protect the people who reside on their lands. When a community is defeated, the people are expected to change their allegiance to the stronger god and serve him. Conversions to new gods often follow dramatic "power encounters."

Some Christians interpret the biblical data on spiritual warfare using the traditional tribal worldview with its emphasis on territory and power encounter. Satan is viewed as having authority over the earth, which he delegates to his demonic hierarchy. As Chuck Lowe points out (1998), this view of territorial spirits has little biblical justification.

Indo-European Worldview

A third worldview of spiritual warfare is based on a cosmic dualism (see figure 3). This is found in Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and Hinduism, and other cultures shaped by the Indo-European worldview. In it mighty gods battle for control of the universe: one seeking to establish a kingdom of righteousness and order, and the other an evil empire. Humans are innocent victims caught in the cosmic struggle. The outcome is uncertain for both sides are equally strong. Victory in the Indo-European myth is never final, however, nor is evil fully defeated. Good and evil here, however, are not defined in absolute moral terms. Good is associated with our people and evil with others. Our gods and people occasionally sin, and do evil, but they are 'good' because they are on our side. Other gods and people do good, but they are evil because they are against us.

Central to this worldview is the myth of redemptive violence. Order can be established only when one side defeats the other in spiritual warfare. Violence is necessary to bring about a better society (Larson 1974, Puhvel 1970, Wink 1992). To win, therefore, is everything. The focus, therefore, is on the battle. Conflicts and competition are intrinsic to the world, and lead to evolution (biology), progress (civilization), development (economic), and prowess (sports).

Figure 3
The Myth of Cosmic Dualism

	GOOD		EVIL
Heavens	Good gods	← central battle of power → (fall out) ↓	Evil gods
Humans	Good people	← battle of power →	Evil people
Nature	Good nature	← battle of power →	Evil nature

Morality in the Indo-European battle is based on the notion not of moral rightness, but of "fairness," and "equal opportunity." To be fair, the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. The outcome must be uncertain. It is "unfair" to pit a professional ball team against a team of amateurs. Equal opportunity means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. If the evil side uses illegal and wicked means,

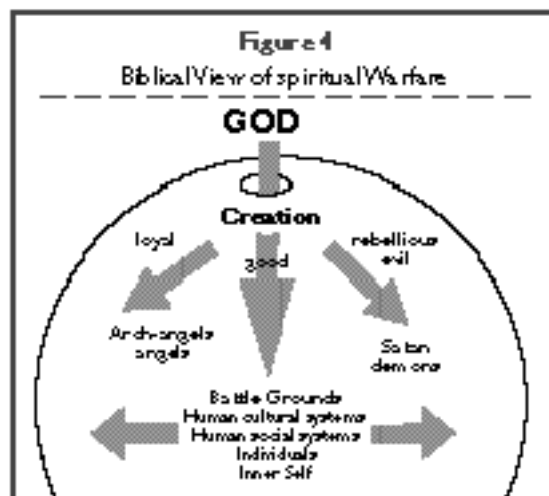
the good side is justified in using them. In movies, the policeman cannot shoot first. When the criminal draws his gun, however, the policeman can shoot him without a trial. In the end, both the good and the bad sides use violence, deceit, and intimidation to win the battle. In this worldview, chaos is the greatest evil and power and control are the greatest good.

Indo-European religious beliefs have largely died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1992), the Indo-European worldview continues to underlie American entertainment (westerns, detective stories, cowboys and Indians, war stories) and sports (football, hockey). People pay to see the battle and leave when it is over.

Many current Christian interpretations of spiritual warfare are based on an Indo-European worldview that sees it as a cosmic battle between God and his angels, and Satan and his demons for the control of people and lands. The battle is fought in the heavens, but it ranges over sky and earth. The central question is one of power--can God defeat Satan? Because the outcome is in doubt, intense prayer is necessary to enable God and his angels to gain victory over the demonic powers. Humans are victims of this struggle. Even those who turn to Christ are subject to bodily attacks by Satan.

Biblical Views of Spiritual Warfare

Warfare is an important metaphor in Scripture and we must take it seriously. Eugene Peterson writes, "There is a spiritual war in progress, an all-out moral battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in continuous and energetic battle against all of it. God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is contested" (1997, 122-123).



The question is, what is the nature of this battle in biblical terms? One thing is clear, the biblical images of spiritual warfare are radically different from those in the materialistic, tribal and Indo-European myths (see figure 4). For example, in the Old Testament the surrounding nations saw Israel's defeats as evidence that their gods were more powerful, but the Old Testament writers are clear--Israel's defeats are not at the hand of pagan gods, but the judgment of Yahweh for their sins (Judg. 4:1-2; 6:1; 10:7; 1 Sam. 28:17-19; 1 Kings 16:2-3; 2 Kings 17:7-23). Similarly, the battle between God and Satan is not one of power (Job 1:1-12, Judg. 9:23-24). The whole world belongs to God. The gods of the pagans are, in fact, no gods. They are merely human-made images fashioned from wood and stone (Is. 44:46). Satan is a fallen angel created by God.

In the New Testament the focus shifts to a more spiritual view of battle. The Gospels clearly demonstrate the existence of demons or unclean spirits who oppress people. The exorcists of Jesus' day used techniques to drive spirits away (Keener 1993). Jesus, in contrast, simply drove the demons out on the basis of his own authority (Mk. 1:21-27; 9:14-32).

The Nature of the Battle

The Bible is clear: there is a cosmic battle between God and Satan (Eph. 6:12). There is, however, no doubt about its outcome. God is Creator. All the rest is creation, dependent on God's ongoing creation for its ongoing existence. The very existence of Satan and sinners, and the power they use in their rebellion is given them by God, and is testimony to his mercy and love. If the cosmic struggle between God and Satan is not one of power, what is it about? It is the establishment of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Two parables help us understand the biblical nature of spiritual warfare. The first is the wayward son (Bailey 1998). The father lavishes his love on his son, but the son rebels and turns against his father. The father is not interested in punishing his son, but in winning him back, so the father reaches out in unconditional love. The son wants to provoke the father into hating him, and thereby to justify his rebellion, but the father takes all the evil his son heaps on him and continues to love. When the son repents, he is restored back fully into the family (Luke 15:21-24). Similarly, God loves his rebellious creations, and urges them to turn to him for salvation. In this battle for human allegiances, humans are not passive victims. They are active co-conspirators with Satan in rebellion against God.

The second parable is the rebellious stewards (Matt. 21:33-44). They are given legitimate authority by the master over part of the kingdom. They rebel and persecute those faithful to the master. According to the Indo-European view the king should defeat the rebels by might and destroy them. In the biblical worldview the king first seeks reconciliation. When this fails, he sends his son, but the son is tried in the court of the stewards, found guilty and put to death. The case is appealed to the king who finds the lower court evil and removes it from power. The central question in Scripture is not power but legitimacy.

Central to our understanding of spiritual warfare is the cross. This makes no sense in the Indo-European or tribal worldviews. In the Indo-European worldview, Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors, called down his angelic hosts waiting ready in heaven (Matt. 26:53), and come down from the cross in triumph to establish his kingdom. In Scriptures the cross is the demonstration of victory through weakness. At the crucifixion Satan used his full might to destroy Christ, or to provoke him to use his divinity wrongly. Either would have meant defeat for Christ--the first because Satan would have overcome him, and the second because it would have destroyed God's plan of salvation through the use of unrighteous means. At the cross Satan, not

Jesus, stands judged because he put Christ, God incarnate as perfect human, to death (Col. 2:15). Christ's obedience unto death "rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil" (Heb. 2:14). The cross was not an end in itself. Rather it removes the obstacles to God's purpose of creating people fit for His Kingdom. The cross is the victory of righteousness over evil, of love over hate, of God's way over Satan's way. If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not see the cross as the final triumph, it is wrong.

Finally, a biblical view of spiritual warfare points to the final establishment of the Kingdom of God throughout the whole universe. When we focus too much on the current battle, we lose sight of the cosmic picture in which the real story is not the battle, but the eternal reign of Christ. That vision transformed the early church, and it should be our focus in ministry today.

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