

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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obedience of faith*

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8. In training people adequately for mission in the 21st century, we shall be handling young adults who are themselves culturally and probably intellectually shaped by *postmodernity*, yet whose education and worldview has largely been shaped by the paradigms of *modernity*, and whose future ministry may well be in cultures that are as yet effectively *pre-modern*. How can we prepare them adequately to understand the cultural identity crisis they themselves are living through, as well as the one they are heading into? 21st century missionaries will need to be the Christian and cultural equivalent of Olympic triple-jumpers.

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## Spiritual Warfare and Worldview

Paul G. Hiebert

**Keywords:** Theology, spiritual warfare, power encounter, culture, context, missiology, complementarity, supernatural, dualism, worldview;

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 (Anderson 1990, Arnold 1997, Kraft 1992, Moreau 1997, Powilson 1995, Wagner 1991, to name a few). 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 missionaries who are forced to question their western denial of this-worldly spirit realities through encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession, and who base their studies in experience, and look for biblical texts to justify their views. These studies generally lack solid, comprehensive theological reflection on the subject.

The second is by biblical scholars who seek to formulate a theological framework for understanding spiritual warfare, but who lack a deep understanding of the bewildering array of beliefs in spirit realities found in religions around the world. Consequently, it is hard to apply their findings in the specific contexts in which ministry occurs. We need a way to build bridges between the biblical teaching and the particularity of different cultures. We hold that Scripture is divine revelation and the source of definitive

understandings of truth. We take for granted here that Satan and his hosts are very real, and that there is a spiritual battle going on. We also affirm that the battle has already been won and that Christ is establishing his reign on earth through his angels, the church and his followers.

## DOING THEOLOGY

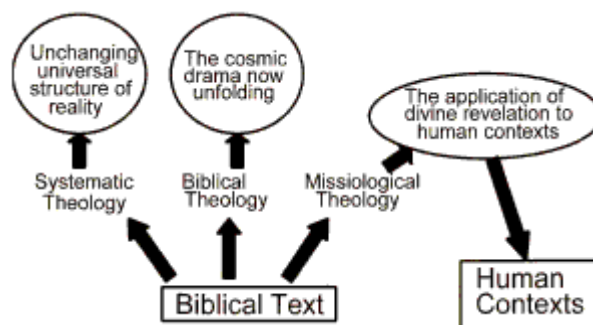
How can we reflect theologically on spiritual warfare? Before answering this, we need to clarify what we mean by 'theology'. I am assuming here that Scripture is divine revelation given us by God, not our human search for God. Theology, then, is our attempts to understand that revelation in our historical and cultural contexts (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Nature of Theology

It is important therefore, that we study Scripture carefully so that our theologies are biblically informed. We must remember, however, that all our theologies are shaped by the times and cultures in which we live. Even the languages we use are shaped by our worldviews. We must remember, too, that there are great gulfs between biblical times and our times, between universal theories and the particulars of everyday life, and between synchronic theologies which examine the unchanging structure of reality and diachronic theologies that study cosmic history. It is important in any theological reflection to work towards bridging these differences.

There are several ways to do theology, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses (figure 2). We will examine some of these briefly.



**Figure 2.** Types of Theology

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Traditionally, in the West, by theology we mean systematic theology. This emerged in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Greek algorithmic logic through the universities of the Middle East and Spain (Finger 1985, 18–21).<sup>1</sup> At first, it was seen as the ‘queen of the science’, but over time it became one discipline among others in theological education—alongside biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, history, missions and other disciplines (Young 1998, 78–79). The central question systematic theology seeks to answer is: ‘What are the unchanging universals of reality?’ It assumes that there are basic, unchanging realities, and if these are known, we can understand the nature of reality (appendix 3). It also assumes that truth is ahistorical and acultural, and is true for everyone everywhere. It uses the algorithmic logic and rhetoric of Greek philosophy which are propositional in nature, and rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.<sup>2</sup> Its goal is to construct a single systematic understanding of universal truth that is comprehensive, logically consistent and conceptually coherent. To arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cognition from feelings and values because the latter are thought to introduce subjectivity into the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental categories and structure implicit in Scripture. It gives us a standard against which to judge our own beliefs, and helps us develop a biblical worldview, both of which are essential for any contemporary reflection on spiritual warfare. Systematic theology also has its limitations. Because it sees ultimate reality in structural, synchronic terms, it cannot adequately deal with change and the cosmic story revealed in Scripture. Because it focuses on universals, it does not tell us how to deal with the particular beliefs and practices found in different cultures.<sup>3</sup> Because it seeks to be exhaustive, it leaves little room for mystery in our understanding of reality. Finally, because it is based on precise algorithmic logic, it has little place for wisdom, or for ambiguity and paradox.<sup>4</sup>

Systematic theology plays a vital role in helping us develop a biblical worldview, but it has not been the motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lombard founded systematic theology when he sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent and synthetically consistent account of all the major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate the rational credibility of Christian faith (Finger 1985, 19). Lombard’s *Scntences*, written in the 1140s, provided the form of much of later Medieval and Reformation Theology. For a historical summary of its emergence see Fuller 1997 and G. R. Evans, A. E. McGrath and A.D. Gallway 1986, particularly pp. 62–173.

<sup>2</sup> An algorithm is a formal logical process which, if carried out correctly, produces the right answer. Algorithmic logic is sometimes called ‘machine’ logic because it is the basis on which calculators and computers work, and can be done faster and more accurately by these than by humans. For an introduction to fuzzy categories and fuzzy logic see Hiebert 1994, 107–136).

<sup>3</sup> Today nonwestern theologians are developing theologies based on other systems of logic. For example, in many African philosophies meaning is not gained by understanding a logical progression, but by grasping the dynamic relationship of the parts to the whole. Indian philosophies are based on fuzzy sets and fuzzy logic—terms used for precise logic based on nonCantorian sets.

<sup>4</sup> The discovery of different systems of logic such as nonEuclidian geometries, nonCantorian (fuzzy) algebra and concrete-functional logic, raises the question whether systematic theologies can be constructed on these as well. The problem is not new. Origen and others used allegory, analogy and other tropological methods in developing their theological frameworks. Tropological methods are essential in studying poetical, wisdom, parabolic and apocalyptic passages in Scripture. An excessive trust in algorithmic logic also overlooks that fact that all human reasoning is touched by our fallen state, and that Paul warns us against putting too much trust in it ([1 Cor. 1:20–25](#)).

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

A second approach to the study of Scripture is biblical theology (appendix 3). Reacting to the scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. He saw theology as a practical science, and stressed experience, the illumination of the Spirit, and a return to the study of the Bible as text (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 170–71). His central question was: ‘What did the biblical passages mean at the time and to those writing them, and what lessons can we learn from this for us today?’

Biblical theology examines the narrative nature of Scripture. It assumes that the heart of revelation is historical in character—that there is a real world with a real history of change over time which is ‘going somewhere’, and which has meaning because it has a beginning, a plot and culminates in God’s eternal reign. It argues that this view of truth as cosmic story is fundamental to the Hebrew worldview, and to an understanding of Scripture.

Biblical theology uses the methods of historiography. It uses the temporal logic of antecedent and consequent causality, and accepts teleological explanations in which God and humans act on the basis of intentions. Biblical theology is important because it gives meaning to life by helping us see the cosmic story in which human history and our own biographies are embedded. It helps us understand the cosmic battle between God and Satan—between righteousness and evil.

Biblical theology has its limits. It focuses on diachronic meaning, leaving the unchanging structure of reality in our peripheral vision. It focuses on past biblical history, not on present events. It also looks at the universal story, not the particular lives of individuals and communities outside the biblical narrative. Consequently, it does not directly offer us applications of biblical truth to the problems we face in specific cultures and persons today. Biblical theology is important because it, too, helps us develop a biblical worldview, but it has not been the motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

## MISSIONOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

To deal with the contemporary, particular problems we face in missions, we need a third way of doing theology—a way of thinking biblically about our lives here and now.<sup>5</sup> Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago that mission ‘is the mother of theology’. Missionaries,

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<sup>5</sup> We can also speak of Tropological theology. Tropological theology is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental and iconic nature of truth. The central question is: ‘How can we comprehend complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic and human reason?’ Theologies of this nature use tropes such as metaphors, types, myths, parables and icons to communicate transcendent truth, and are able to deal with the fuzziness and ambiguities of concrete human life. They use the logic of analogy which recognizes 1) that in some ways two entities, A and B, are alike, 2) that in some ways A and B are different (areas in which the analogy does not hold), and 3) that there are areas in which it is not clear whether there is a similarity or not. It is this area of uncertainty that generates new insights as the mind explores the power and limits of the analogy.

Tropological theology is doxological. It is not an abstract reflection on the nature of truth for the sake of truth itself. It sees theological reflection as an essential element of worship. Christopher Hall writes (1998, 67), ‘For the [early church] fathers, the Bible was to be studied, pondered and exegeted within the context of prayer, worship, reverence and holiness’. It is also tied to the character of the exegete. For example, among the Russian Orthodox, the spiritual leader must be ‘knowledgeable in the Holy Scriptures, just, capable of teaching his pupils, full of truly unhypocritical love for all, meek, humble, patient and free from anger and all other passions—greed, vainglory, glutton . . .’ (Oleksa 1987, 14). In other words, one cannot trust a brilliant scholar if he or she is arrogant, unfaithful, impatient or deceitful.

by the very nature of their task, must do theological reflection to make the message of Scripture understood and relevant to people in the particularities of their lives. David notes, 'Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (1991, 124)'.

What is missiological theology? Clearly, it draws on systematic and biblical theologies to understand Scripture, but it must build the bridge that brings these truths into the sociocultural and historical contexts in which the missionary serves. (appendix 3). Its central question is: 'What does God's Word say to humans in this particular situation?' Evangelical mission theologians affirm that the gospel is universal truth for all. They also recognize that all humans live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. Eugene Peterson writes,

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it's always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it's always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you've done; who I am and what I've done (1997, 185).

The task of the mission theologian is to communicate and apply the gospel to people living today so that it transforms them and their cultures into what God wants them to be. Missiological theology seeks to bridge the gulf between biblical revelation given millennia ago and human contexts today.<sup>6</sup>

The method of analysis used in missiological theology is to use the biblical worldview developed through systematic and biblical theologies, and to apply the findings through the method of precedent cases, the method used in the British and American legal systems.<sup>7</sup> For example, in dealing with polygamy, mission theologians examine cases of marriage in the Bible, such as Adam, Abraham and David, and draw on the instructions given by Moses and Paul to develop biblical principles of marriage. They then study the contemporary case they are addressing, and seek to apply the biblical principles to the situation, taking into account the present context and the many principles that may apply to the case.

Missiological theology involves four steps. The first is *phenomenology*—to study current ministry cases and biblical parallels to find precedents in Scripture. Mission theologians must seek to understand the cultural context as the people they serve understand it.<sup>8</sup> They must also examine their own worldviews—the assumptions and logic which they bring with them—to see how these colour their analysis. Here the methods developed by the social science to exegete human realities can be of help.

The second step in missiological theology is *ontology*—to examine both the people's and the theologian's understandings of the particular situation in the light of biblical revelation. This is closely tied to the third step, namely an *evaluation* of the present situation in the light of biblical teachings and a decision on what should be done.

The final step in missiological theology is *missiology*—helping people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. It recognizes that all humans live in and

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<sup>6</sup> The process of 'critical contextualization' is discussed in more detail in Hiebert 1994, 75–92.

<sup>7</sup> This stands in contrast to the French system of law that examines cases in the light of the Napoleonic Code, and not in terms of precedent cases that help to interpret and nuance the application of law in the present setting.

<sup>8</sup> This is referred to as an 'emic' analysis, which stands in contrast to 'etic' analysis which uses the categories and logic of the analyst which are based on a comparative study of many cultures and societies.

are shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts, and that they can begin an ongoing process of transformation only by starting with their existing systems of thought. We cannot expect people to simply abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. This transformation must also involve whole communities as well as individuals.

## **COMPLEMENTARITY**

Systematic, biblical and missiological theologies are complementary. Just as an architect makes different blueprints for the same building—structural, electrical, and plumbing, so theologians need to look at reality from different perspectives and through different lenses. We need systematic theology to help us understand the questions, assumptions, categories and logic found in Scripture regarding the structure of reality. We need biblical theology to help us understand the cosmic story unfolding in Scripture, the ‘mystery’ now revealed to us. We need missiological theology to communicate the transforming gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves.

## **HUMAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

Applying this model of missiological theology to the current debates regarding ‘spiritual warfare’, we must begin by examining what the people we serve believe about spirits and spiritual battles. 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.

It is not possible here to examine the specific views of spiritual warfare found in the many cultures around the world.<sup>9</sup> That is the task of each missionary as he/she ministers in specific human contexts. Our task, rather, is to examine our own worldviews to see how these shape our reading of Scripture. If we are not aware of our own worldviews, we are in danger of reading the understandings of war and warfare of our culture into Scripture and of distorting its message. We will briefly examine three worldviews underlying the current debate in the West regarding the nature of spiritual warfare to see how they have shaped the current debate regarding spiritual warfare.

## **MODERN SUPERNATURAL/NATURAL DUALISM**

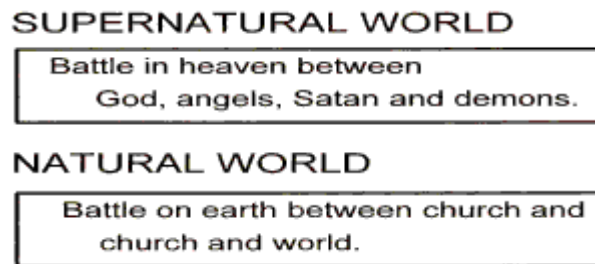
The worldview of the West has been shaped since the sixteenth century by the Cartesian dualism that divides the cosmos into two realities—the supernatural world of God, angels and demons, and the natural material world of humans, animals, plants and matter. This has led to two views of spiritual warfare. First, as secularism spread, the reality of the supernatural world was denied. In this materialist worldview the only reality is the natural world which can best be studied by science. For modern secular people, there is no spiritual warfare because there are no gods, angels or demons. There is only war in nature between humans, communities and nations. Some Christians accept this denial of spiritual realities, and demythologize the Scriptures to make it fit modern secular scientific beliefs. Angels, demons, miracles and other supernatural realities are explained

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in an Indian village a missionary must be aware of the battles of the Hindu gods such as Krishna, Rama and Narasimha. They must also examine the nature and activities of *rakshasas*, *dayams*, *bhutams*, *ammas*, *ghoshams* and other earth-bound spirit beings that the people believe inhabit the village, which are not a part of formal Hinduism.

away in scientific terms. 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 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 (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Modern View of Spiritual Warfare

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, if they exist, exist in the heavens, not on earth. Western missionaries influenced by this dualism denied the realities of witchcraft, spirit possession, evil eye and magic in the cultures where they served. Consequently they failed 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 RELIGIONS

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 honour 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 (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Tribal View of Spiritual Encounters

For the most part these alliances are based on ethnicity and territory. The battle is not primarily between 'good' and 'evil', but between 'us' and 'them'. 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. We see this in the Old Testament in way the Arameans viewed their battles with the Israelites ([1 Kings 20:23–30](#)).

Land plays an important role in tribal views of spiritual warfare. Gods, spirits and ancestors reside in specific territories or objects, and protect their people who reside on their lands. Their powers do not extend to other areas. When people go on distant trips, they are no longer under the protection of their gods. 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’.

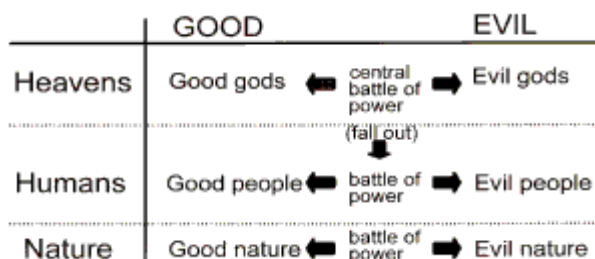
Some Christians interpret the biblical data on spiritual warfare, using the traditional tribal themes of territory and power encounter (Peretti 1988, and Wagner 1991). Satan is viewed as having authority over the earth, an authority he exercises through delegation to his demonic hierarchy. As Chuck Lowe points out (1998), this view of territorial spirits has little biblical justification. The belief in spirits who rule territories and control people implies that these people are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods, and that once they are delivered they will be ready to convert to Christ in mass. This sells human sinfulness short. Even if demons are driven out, humans call them back and renew their individual and corporate rebellion against God.

Belief in evil spirits now ruling geographic territories also denies the work of the Cross. Whatever delegated authority Satan had at the time of creation was taken away after the resurrection when Christ declared, ‘And now all authority has been given unto me ([Mt. 28:16](#))’. Satan now has no authority over the earth, only the authority given him by his demonic and human followers.

## COSMIC DUALISM

A third worldview of spiritual warfare is based on a cosmic dualism (figure 5).

This is found in Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and Hinduism, and in cultures shaped by the Indo-European worldview, including those in the West. 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. The outcome is uncertain for both sides are equally strong, and the battle is unending for when good or evil are defeated they rise to fight again. All reality is divided into two camps: good gods and bad ones, good nations and evil ones. Ultimately the division is not between cosmic good and evil—good gods and nations often do evil in order to win the battle, and evil gods and nations do good. The real division is between ‘our side’ and ‘the enemy’. If we win, we can establish the kingdom, and by definition it will be good. If the others win, they will establish what we see as an evil empire.



**Figure 5.** The Myth of Cosmic Dualism

Central to this worldview is the myth of redemptive violence. Order can be established only when one side defeats the other in spiritual warfare. In other words, violence is necessary to bring about a better society (Larson 1974, Lincoln 1986. Puhvel 1970, Wink

1992). To win, therefore, is everything. The focus, therefore, is on the battle. The myths tell of the battles between the gods, and their effect on humans. Conflicts and competition are intrinsic to the world, and lead to evolution (biology), progress (civilization), development (economic), and prowess (sports).

Morality in the Indo-European battle is based on notions of 'fairness' and 'equal opportunity', not on some moral absolutes. 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 violence can be used to restore order.

Indo-European religious beliefs have largely died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1992), the Indo-European worldview continues to dominate modern western thought. It is the basis for the theories of evolution and capitalism, and is the dominant theme in western entertainment and sports. People pay to see the football battle, and go home at the end claiming victory or making excuses for the loss. The story ends when the detective unmasks the villain, the cowboys defeat the Indians, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leah thwart the Evil Empire, and Superman destroys the enemies of humankind. Victory in the Indo-European myth is never final, however, nor is evil fully defeated. Every week Bluto grabs Olive Oil. Every week Popeye tries to rescue her. Every week Bluto beats up Popeye. Every week Popeye gets his spinach and defeats Bluto. Bluto never learns to leave Olive Oil alone. Popeye never learns to take his spinach before he attacks Bluto. Evil always rises again to challenge the good, so good must constantly be on guard against future attacks.

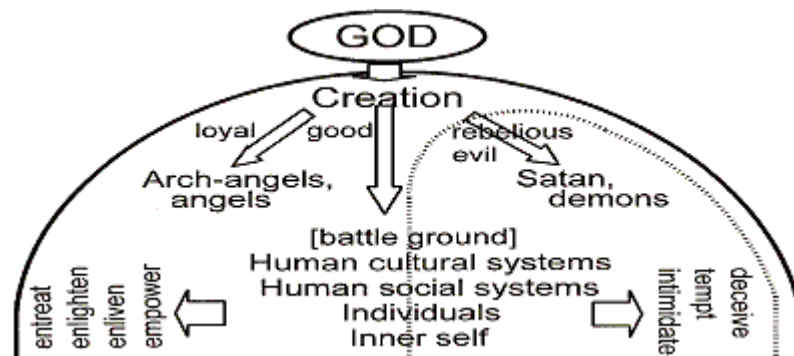
Many current Christian interpretations of spiritual warfare are based on an Indo-European worldview which sees it as a cosmic battle between God and his angels, and Satan and his demons for the control of people and lands. The battle is fought in the heavens, but it ranges over sky and earth. The central 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, dualistic, animistic and Indo-European myths (figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Biblical View of Spiritual Warfare

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 are the judgement 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](#), [Jud. 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 such as shoving a smelly root up the possessed person's nose to drive the spirit away, or by invoking a higher spirit through magical incantations (Keener 1993). Jesus, in contrast, simply drove the demons out on the basis of his own authority ([Mk. 1:21-27](#); [9:14-32](#)). He was not simply some mighty sorcerer who learned to manipulate the spirits through more powerful magic. He is the sovereign God of the universe exerting his will and authority over Satan and his helpers.

## 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. The dualism of God and Satan, good and evil, is not eternal and coexistent. In the beginning was God, eternal, righteous, loving and good. Satan, sin and sinners appear in creation. Moreover, God's creation is an ongoing process. The very existence of Satan and sinners, and the power they use in their rebellion is given them by God, and is a testimony to his mercy and love. Finally, whatever the battle, it was won at Calvary.

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. It is for human hearts and godly societies. God in his mercy is inviting sinners to repent and turn to him.

Two parables help us understand the nature of the warfare we face. The first is that of 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 ([Lk. 15:21-24](#)). Similarly, God loves his rebellious creations, and longs to save them. If he were to do less, he would be less than perfect love. In this battle for human allegiances, humans are not passive victims. They are active co-

conspirators with Satan and his host in rebellion against God, and God urges them to turn to him for salvation.

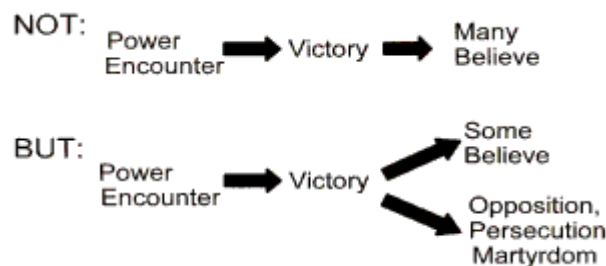
The second parable is that of the rebellious vassals or stewards ([Mt. 21:33–44](#)). At first, the stewards are faithful, and their appointment gives them legitimate authority over part of the kingdom. Later they rebel and persecute the righteous. In Indo-European mythology the king simply defeats the rebels by might and destroys them. In the biblical worldview the king first seeks reconciliation, so he sends his servants. When they are mistreated, he sends his son. Even then the king does not remove the rebellious servants arbitrarily. He shows their unfitness to rule by sending his son, who is found guilty and put to death by the servants. The case is appealed to the king who finds the lower court evil and removes the rebellious servants from power. The central question in Scripture is not power but authority.

## THE WEAPONS OF WARFARE

Scripture makes it clear that the weapons of spiritual warfare are different for God and for Satan. Satan blinds the minds of humans to the truth through lies and deception. He tempts them with the pleasures of sin by appealing to their old nature. He intimidates them with fear by sending misfortunes. He accuses them of their sins. Above all, he invites them to worship themselves as gods ([Gen. 3:1–7](#), [2 Tim. 3:2](#)). God uses the weapons of truth to enlighten the mind, righteousness to combat sin, and peace and *shalom* to counter temptation. Above all, he invites all into the kingdom of God in which Christ reigns in perfect love and justice. Satan and his followers [demonic and human] devise cultures and societies of rebellion that blind human minds. They seek to control those who turn themselves over to the rebellion, to keep sinners from converting, and to cause the saved to fall. Human rebellion is both individual and corporate. God and his followers [angelic and human] create the church as a counter-cultural community where Christ is recognized and worshipped as Lord, and where truth, love and righteousness reign. In the battle, God, his angels and his saints minister to protect and guide his people ([2 Kings 6:17](#); [Gen. 24:7](#); [31:11–12](#); [Dan. 8:15–16](#); [9:20–23](#); [Mt. 1:20](#)).

## POWER ENCOUNTERS

At the heart of much of the current debate regarding spiritual warfare is the concept of ‘power encounter’. Often this is seen in Indo-European terms (figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Power Encounter in Scripture

Proponents see such encounters as opportunities to demonstrate the might of God through dramatic healings, casting out of demons and divine protection, and assume that when people see God’s miraculous interventions, they will believe. Scripture and church history show that demonstrations of God’s power often lead some to believe, but they also excite the enemy to greater opposition leading to persecution and death. We see this in

the book of Acts where victories are followed by persecution, imprisonment and death (appendix 1). Above all we see it in John where Jesus confronts the religious and political establishments and is crucified (appendix 2). In biblical spiritual warfare, the Cross is the ultimate and final victory ([1 Cor. 1:18-25](#)). If our understanding of spiritual warfare cannot explain this, we need to reexamine it. On the cross 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.

The cross as victory makes no sense in the Indo-European or tribal worldviews. In Indo-European worldview (figure 8), the Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors, called down his angelic hosts waiting ready in heaven, and come down from the cross in triumph to establish his kingdom. In Scripture the cross is the demonstration of victory through weakness. At the cross Satan stands judged because he put Christ, God incarnate as perfect man, to death. On the cross Jesus bore the sins of the world and triumphed over all the powers of evil. His obedience unto death ‘rendered powerless him who had the power of death that is the devil’ ([Heb. 2:14](#)). The cross was Satan’s undoing ([Col. 2:15](#)), but Satan’s defeat was not an end in itself. Rather it removes the obstacles to God’s purpose of creating people fit for his kingdom ([Gen. 12:1](#); [Ex. 19:3ff](#); [1 Peter 2:9](#)). 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.

INDO-EUROPEAN	BIBLICAL
- battle between equals	- rebellious creation
- seek to defeat, control	- seek to win
- hate the enemy	- love enemy, hate evil
- use power of force	- use power of truth, love
- use means of the enemy	- use only righteous means
- inflict pain	- bear pain
SWORD	CROSS

**Figure 8.** Indo-European and Biblical Views of Warfare

The biblical heroes in spiritual warfare are given in the hall of fame in Hebrews. Some overthrew kingdoms, escaped death by the sword, put whole armies to flight and received their loved ones back from death ([Heb. 11:33-35](#)). Even greater are the victors who were tortured, mocked, whipped, chained, oppressed, mistreated and martyred ([Heb. 11:36-38](#)). They were ‘too good for this world’. In all these cases, victory lies not in defeating the enemy, but in standing firm in faith and bearing witness to Christ, no matter what the outcome.

Christians and churches are in desperate need of showing God’s power in transformed lives and in a Christlike confrontation of evil wherever they find it, whether demonic, systemic or personal. Here we face two dangers. On the one hand, we may avoid bold demonstrations of power for fear these may become magic. The church then is poor in the manifestations of God’s might. On the other hand, in our zeal to demonstrate God’s power we can run after the sensational and be tempted to use power for our own glory. Neither miracles nor the Cross can be taken out of the gospel without distorting it.

## THE COMING KINGDOM

Finally, a biblical view of spiritual warfare points to the ultimate 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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## Appendix 1

### Power Encounters in Acts

#### Chapter

2. Pentecost: power of the Holy Spirit—ridicule, some believe
3. Peter heals a crippled man—put in jail, some believe
5. Ananias and Sapphira die from God's judgement—great fear in the church [God judges evil in believers and the church as well as evil of Satan]
5. The apostles heal many—they are put in prison
6. Stephen performs signs and wonders—he is killed, and persecution spreads
11. Growth of the church—persecution, death of James
13. Paul confronts Elymas—proconsul believes
14. Paul and Barnabas do signs and wonders—some believe, Paul stoned
16. Paul and Silas cast out a demon—they are beaten and put in jail
17. Paul preaches the gospel—some scoff, others believe
21. Paul preaches and defends himself—he is jailed and sent to Rome

## Appendix 2

### Power encounters in John Jesus Confronts the Powers of Jerusalem and Rome

#### Chapter

1. **Birth:** his birth as a king challenges Herod and earthly kingdoms.
2. **Overturms the tables:** challenges the corrupt religious order which turned the court of evangelism into a market place
3. **Nicodemus:** challenges the ignorance of a leader of the religious establishment.
4. **Samaritan woman:** violates Jewish religious exclusivism.
5. **Heals on the Sabbath:** confronts the legalism of the establishment.
6. **Feeds the five thousand:** shows up the failure of establishment to care for the people.
7. **Feast of Booths:** confronts the religious leaders and their unbelief.
8. **Preaches:** challenges the merciless interpretation of the law.
9. **Heals:** shows the powerlessness of the religious establishment.
10. **Confronts the Pharisees:** challenges their teachings.

11. **Raises the dead:** shows the powerlessness of the religious leaders.
12. **Triumphal Entry:** challenges the leaders' understanding of God's kingdom.
- 13–19. **Jewish and Roman Leaders Conspire and Kill Jesus.**
- 20–21. **Jesus rises from the dead:** defeats Satan and the political/religious establishments, establishes his kingdom.

## Appendix 3

### A Comparison of Evangelical Systematic, Biblical and Missiological Theologies

	SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY	BIBLICAL THEOLOGY	MISSIOLOGICAL THEOLOGY
<b>SOURCE:</b>	The Bible is divine revelation	The Bible is divine revelation	The Bible is divine revelation
<b>KEY QUESTION:</b>	What are the eternal, unchanging cosmic realities?	What is the cosmic story?	What does Scripture say to this particular human situation?
<b>METHOD:</b>	Abstract logic	analogical Historiography	Precedent teachings and cases
<b>RESULTS</b>	Helps develop the synchronic understandings of a biblical worldview	Helps develop the diachronic understandings of a biblical worldview	Helps develop the missional vision and motivation based on a biblical worldview
<b>LIMITATIONS:</b>	Difficulty in bridging from: –structure to story, –universal to particular –explanation to mystery Not missiological in nature	Difficulty in bridging from: –story to structure, –universal to particular to Not missiological in nature	Difficult in bridging from: –today to structure, to –now to cosmic time in and story