

Towards a Modern Understanding and Application of Spiritual Warfare

Two prevalent modern approaches to spiritual warfare are truth encounters or power encounters.¹ Truth encounter approaches often emphasize the individual's personal responsibility for seeking truth to counter the lies of Satan. Power encounter approaches tend to characterize spiritual warfare as a battle that necessitates direct, confrontational encounters between spiritual leaders and demons through practices such as exorcism and territorial spirit identification and prayer.² Although attention to spiritual warfare seems to go through periods of emphasis and disinterest, Scripture, church history, and modern treatments all recognize that there are ongoing attacks of the devil and his demons against the church and Christian believers.³

Many western Christians fall into categories of either looking down on spiritual warfare "with disdain," remaining unaware of spiritual warfare, questioning spiritual practices, blindly accepting the spiritual warfare views of their leaders, or dismissing "new approaches as unbiblical and therefore unacceptable."⁴ Scott Moreau

¹James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 38. Many spiritual warfare works offer differing groups of approaches to spiritual warfare. Beilby and Eddy utilize four categories of a "World Systems Model" (47-88), "Classical Model" (89-123), "Ground-Level Deliverance Model" (129-172), and "Strategic-Level Deliverance Model" (173-210). They describe Anderson's model as a "bridging effort between 'power encounter' versions of the deliverance model and the classic model" (38).

²"Central to this model is the conviction that demonic entities can take up residence in people's lives and that exorcism- or 'deliverance' ministry- in one form or another is frequently required for their liberation and healing. . . . centers on the ideas of territorial spirits, spiritual mapping, and identificational repentance. This approach to spiritual warfare- commonly known as strategic- or cosmic-level spiritual warfare—can be seen as emerging from, and thus sharing the basic convictions of, the deliverance model, while further developing it in significant ways. It also shares some intriguing elements with the world systems model." *Ibid.*, 36-43.

³"Exorcism practice seems 'to diminish in the Middle Ages,' but is still referenced among the Germanic tribes, Norwegians, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Martin Luther, the Catholic Church's 1614 *Rituale Romanum* (exorcism guidelines), and other sources." Tormod Engelsviken, "Historical Overview 3," in *Deliver Us from Evil Consultation* (Nairobi: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2000), accessed January 4, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/historical-overview-3.html>.

⁴Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, viii.

categorizes evangelical approaches to spiritual warfare into seven types of encounters. This author takes those categories and consolidates them into the five approaches below.⁵ Four of the author's categories closely parallel the structure of Christ's command in Mark 12:30-31 to love the Lord our God with all of our heart (relational encounter), soul (truth encounter), mind (mind encounter), and strength (power encounter).

An Avoidance Strategy

Believers who advocate for no encounters with demons are those by whom "demonic confrontation is viewed with suspicion."⁶ These typically Western believers have been so "influenced by a naturalistic worldview that only admits the reality of what can be seen or touched or heard, deny[ing] that demons exist today."⁷ John MacArthur describes this group as one who fails "to understand that the Christian life is a fierce spiritual battle."⁸ Walter Wink also describes this group's materialistic worldview as deriving from a theology that does not allow for an understanding of angels, spirits, Satan, demons, or the active spirit realm at all.⁹ Wink also mentions that the best way to discover the weakness of a system "is to discover what it excludes from conversation."¹⁰ Those who resist any discussion and consideration of spiritual warfare risk being caught off guard in the midst of an attack. Scripture and church history emphasize resisting and

⁵Ibid., 117-19. Moreau's categories are (1) Traditionalists (2) Experience-based Warriors (3) Evangelical Confronters (4) Theologians and Biblical Scholars (5) Spiritual Healers (6) Truth-Encounter Advocates and (7) Cross-Cultural Spiritual Conflict Analysts. Interestingly, Moreau groups himself in three of the categories: Theologians and Biblical Scholars, Truth-Encounter Advocates, and Cross-Cultural Spiritual Conflict Analysts.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 419.

⁸John MacArthur, *Standing Strong: How to Resist the Enemy of Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2006), 9.

⁹Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 1.

¹⁰Ibid.

standing firm against Satan's activity and influence in this world. John reminds believers to "test the spirits" that "have gone out into the world," thus implying that those who are in Christ should never ignore the spiritual battle raging around them (1 John 4:1).

A Relational Strategy

Jeremiah warns us that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). In spiritual warfare there is a group of practitioners that is often referred to as spiritual healers who "explore the healing of deep hurts through a variety of therapeutic means (prayer, counseling, medical intervention)."¹¹ This relational encounter category has no prescribed approach, but they generally seek to "explore the healing of deep hurts through a variety of therapeutic means."¹²

Charles Kraft explains the difference of his deliverance ministry by their claims that "complete healing does not come unless both the emotional and spiritual components of a person's problems are addressed."¹³ Kraft advocates "dealing primarily with the emotional garbage but also with the spiritual 'rats' (demons)."¹⁴ In stating this, Kraft argues that demons are not the main problem, but the emotional garbage that attracts them. Accordingly, he cautions against a counseling-only or deliverance-only approach, instead arguing for the use of both relationships and power to confront Satan and his demons.¹⁵

Relational encounter practitioners must be on their guard against reducing the problems of their counselees to a mere emotional, flesh focused problem. Jeremiah

¹¹Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 118.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Kraft, *Confronting Powerless Christianity*, 57.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Kraft, *Confronting Powerless Christianity*, 57.

asserts and reminds that the Lord searches the heart and tests the mind (Jer 17:10). Believers must likewise help those who have been deceived into thinking and feeling Satan's lies.

A Mind Strategy

Theologians and bible scholars most commonly assume a mind encounter approach to spiritual warfare, but their writings “vary widely in perspective.”¹⁶ These writings provide helpful perspectives with spiritual warfare but often avoid spiritual warfare phenomenology and experiences. Some authors do engage in and provide cross-cultural analysis where they are able to “examine issues of spiritual warfare in light of cultural frames.”¹⁷ Academic treatments of spiritual warfare are greatly needed in order to consider requests such as a perceived need for a hermeneutic that

a) Allows culture and experience to play a role in the formulation of our understanding and theology of spiritual conflict. The basis and test of such a theology is Scripture, as faithfully interpreted by the Spirit-guided hermeneutical community of the global church. b) Allows an examination of issues that arise in Christian experience not directly addressed in Scripture. c) Accepts the fact that the Holy Spirit has surprised the church by acting in ways not explicitly taught in Scripture (Acts 10 and 15) and may be doing so again.¹⁸

Paul Hiebert challenges those who engage spiritual warfare through their minds to humbly recognize that their “understandings of Scriptures are partial and biased.”¹⁹ Hiebert continues by emphasizing that scholars should never forget to “constantly test our theological interpretations against biblical teachings, [so that] they become increasingly rooted in the biblical message itself.”²⁰ The Apostle Paul reminds

¹⁶Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 118.

¹⁷Ibid., 119.

¹⁸Ibid., xxvii.

¹⁹Paul G. Hiebert and Frances F. Hiebert, eds., *Case Studies in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 18.

²⁰Ibid.

believers that the conflicts in their lives are not merely a “war according to the flesh” and that the “weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh” (2 Cor 10:3,4). Paul also follows this with affirmation of the mind encounter approach as part of spiritual warfare when he pens that “we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). Encountering spiritual warfare with the mind is an important aspect that can serve as a biblical corrective to those who uphold merely phenomenological and experienced-based approaches. Mind encounter practitioners can lay a vital theological foundation, but they also must be aware of the biases of their own worldview and experiences.

A Power Strategy

The power encounter approach is commonly regarded as the most controversial as they seek to “integrate experience in testing doctrinal formulations.”²¹ The emphasis power enthusiasts place on experience leads to a wide spectrum of praxis and belief. The category of power encounter is defined by the fact that its practitioners “recognize reality of demonic work in Christians and advocate a direct confrontational deliverance approach.”²²

Deliverance practices and methodologies range from the heretical, syncretistic, debatable, and mostly-biblical. In order to support power encounters, these believers point to Paul’s writing to the church at Corinth where he says that “kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor 4:20). Others justify their approach by referencing where Christ states, “whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do” (John 14:12).

Many power encounter leaders have isolated themselves from many others in the evangelical community in their passionate promotion of their experiences and

²¹Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 118.

²²Ibid.

perceived successes. C. Peter Wagner demonstrates such isolationist hyperbole through his emphasis on territorial spirits and proclaiming that ignorance of these spirits is maybe “the most widespread danger of all among the evangelical community.”²³ A scriptural warning concerning pride is a helpful reminder for power-encounter practitioners, that they should “not think of yourself more highly than you ought” (Rom 12:3), and that they should test their experiences in light of Scriptural commands and examples (Acts 17:11).

Methods. Much of the theological concern over the confrontational approach to spiritual warfare in evangelistic ministry derives from their faulty use of Scripture. Many in this category seem to “appeal to pragmatism” and demonstrate a “willingness to consider ideas and follow practices that are admittedly extra-biblical.”²⁴ Sometimes their knowledge is found by “by interviewing the demons in demonized persons,” through a “natural capacity or spiritual gifting,” by “supernatural insights,” or in “special revelation.”²⁵

At times, power advocates “assume that the beliefs about spirit realities held by practitioners of occult and animistic/folk religions correspond to reality.”²⁶ Spiritual warfare through power encounter often demonstrates faulty epistemological principles as their “truths are accredited, justified, and propagated by means of anecdotes culled from many sources.”²⁷ These problems compound through retrospective attempts “to link the doctrines to Scripture . . . in support of their doctrines . . . alternate interpretations are

²³C. Peter Wagner and Fredrick Douglas Pennoyer, eds., *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 88.

²⁴Edward Rommen, ed., *Spiritual Power and Missions: Raising the Issues* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 41; Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, ix.

²⁵Rommen, *Spiritual Power and Missions*, 26, 51; Wagner and Pennoyer, *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, 33; Rommen, *Spiritual Power and Missions*, 53-55.

²⁶Rommen, *Spiritual Power and Missions*, 31.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

rarely entertained. They seem to disregard clear passages which do not agree with their assertions.”²⁸ This sort of epistemological and hermeneutical approach leads to significant theological problems regarding the authority and perspicuity of Scripture and further isolates them from much of the evangelical community.

Focus. Those concerned with power encounters often demonstrate “an excessive and unhealthy fascination with demons.”²⁹ They are even criticized by their own members such as C. Peter Wagner who cautions against “overemphasizing power” by referencing Jesus’ caution not to rejoice because the spirits are subject to you (Luke 10:20).³⁰ Due to their continual focus on Satan, demons, and spirits, the perception is that their focus is on the enemy more than on God. It is a helpful exhortation and corrective to “never go looking for demons, but if one appears under your feet, tread on it!”³¹ Power encounter emphasis on methodologies and strategies often lead them towards a man-centered approach to evangelism.

Summary. Many within the power encounter camp communicate a prideful and isolationist understanding of spiritual warfare. These believers need to reevaluate their use of Scripture and not forget that God has breathed it out and that it is all profitable (2 Tim 3:16) while remembering that their own fallen nature is prone to Satan’s deceitfulness. Finally, power practitioners should ensure that their hope is set on Christ (1 Pet 1:13) and not themselves or the spirits. By drawing near to him (Jas 4:8) who is greater than the one in the world (1 John 4:4), Christians can have confidence and experience lasting power in Him.

²⁸Ibid., 55.

²⁹MacArthur, *Standing Strong*, 10.

³⁰Wagner and Pennoyer, *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, 87.

³¹Douglas and Graham, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 896.

A Truth Strategy

The approach of encountering demons through a focus on truth happens by “teaching people truth and its application rather than direct demonic confrontation.”³² There are several different perspectives within this category, but most do not seek out or actively engage the enemy during their encounters. These Christians may hear or witness a demonic manifestation, but their response is usually to ignore it or to rebuke it to silence so that their evangelistic work may continue. This form of engagement is modeled after Paul’s annoyance with and concise verbal exorcism of the divining slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:16-18).

Truth practitioners do not doubt that they must wrestle “against dark spiritual forces,” because “the kingdom of darkness is still present, and the devil still ‘prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour’ (1 Pet 5:8).”³³ This view may sound similar to power practitioners, but the difference is in that they do not see themselves as the agent of change. They view the agent of change as the Holy Spirit coming into the lives of unbelievers. This truth approach focuses on how sin entraps, ensnares, and enslaves people. Like Jesus’ command in John 8:31-32, they prioritize the Bible as truth that leads to freedom found alone in Christ.

Methods. Truth encounter methodologies are focus on the authority believers have in Christ. Wayne Grudem points out that “authority over demonic spirits was not limited to Jesus himself, for he gave similar authority first to the twelve (Matt. 10:8; Mark 3:15), and then to seventy disciples. . . . authority over unclean spirits later extended beyond the seventy disciples to those in the early church who ministered in

³²Moreau, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 119.

³³Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), 20.

Jesus' name (Acts 8:7; 16:18; Jam. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9).”³⁴ This Christ-based authority is sufficient.

Truth proponents do not focus on discovering new techniques or special insights into the enemy as Jesus “simply drove the demons out on the basis of his own authority (Mark 1:21-27; 9:14-32).”³⁵ Believers must be proactive in spiritual growth so that they are prepared for the day of battle, understanding that “spiritual warfare is not about reacting to the Enemy—it is about putting on the armor of God.”³⁶ This approach sees spiritual warfare defined not only by preparation, but also by direct evangelism that takes “the gospel of light into the kingdom of darkness.”³⁷ Scriptural principles drive the truth encounter approach to the Bible as an all-sufficient guide to Christ’s authority and the Holy Spirit’s power.

Focus. While power encounter specialists invest a great deal of time evaluating and understanding the enemy, truth encounter believers spend time looking at a God who is sovereign. They see that “the battle between God and Satan is not one of power (Job 1:1-12, Judg 9:23-24),” for Satan is on a leash with God-prescribed limits to his actions and ability.³⁸ While some “warfare strategies often focus more on our power” than on human weakness in light of God’s strength (2 Cor 12:9), truth encounter proponents uphold the “the necessity of spiritual disciplines as armor against Satan’s wiles.”³⁹ Ongoing sin identifies us with Satan (1 John 3:8) while Christ’s mercy and grace identify us as righteous and holy in the sight of God (Titus 3:3-7). Accordingly the

³⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 418-19.

³⁵Hiebert, *Case Studies in Missions*, 5.

³⁶Lawless, *Discipled Warriors*, 18.

³⁷Ibid., 83.

³⁸Hiebert, *Case Studies in Missions*, 5.

³⁹Lawless, *Discipled Warriors*, 16.

truth encounter focus in spiritual warfare is not for “demonology specialists, but men of God” who help bring souls from darkness into light (John 8:12), from death to life (Ps 56:13), and from wandering to truth (Jas 5:19,20).⁴⁰

Summary. The truth encounter approach to spiritual warfare applies God’s truth to all aspects of life by putting off the lies of Satan and putting on the living Word of God in Christ. Truth encounter members do not actively seek to dialogue or have power encounters with the enemy, but they believe in his real activity and actively resist the devil by standing firm through the armor of God and prayer. Truth encounter advocates place special emphasis on wielding “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17) as Christ did against Satan (Matt 4:1-11). Whereas other approaches are focused on demonic forces or on the humans themselves, the truth encounter approach seeks to be theocentric in every aspect of the battle. Believers are exhorted to be bold and courageous as they engage the enemy in evangelism and discipleship through the blood of Christ.

A Summary of Strategies

We know from Scripture that Satan is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44) so it should not surprise us that he would attempt to lead us to rebel against God in our heart, soul, mind, and strength contrary to Christ’s command in Mark 12:30. As Satan tries to deceive believers in these ways, they must put on Christ’s truths through Scripture and put off Satan’s lies. Scripture is the foundation and test in evaluating understandings, applications, and interactions between the mind encounter, relational encounter, power encounter, and truth encounter specialists in their approaches to spiritual warfare. Although the truth encounter approach, which Anderson advocates, seems to be the most biblically and theologically correct strategy, there are helpful contributions from the

⁴⁰Douglas and Graham, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 896.

relational, mind, and power strategies. These categories have more overlap in belief and practice than they realize or care to admit, and would benefit through increased dialogue, clarification, and interaction with the other approaches.