

# **SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE BELIEVER**

## **POSITION PAPER**

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### **Introduction**

The Assemblies of God affirms the reality of spiritual warfare, acknowledging that the Christ-follower is engaged in a conflict in the world, with the flesh, and with the devil. Believers do not make this affirmation with any fear, because the apostle John provides the assurances that “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is the world” (1 John 4:4), and “the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them” (1 John 5:18).<sup>1</sup> The believer, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, is more than a conqueror (Romans 8:31–39). Such assurance, however, is no license for failing to take seriously the challenges posed by ongoing opposition to the kingdom of God.

Followers of Christ must remember that the “struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus summarized the divine expectation for humans: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). From the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1–19), the devil has opposed humanity’s fulfillment of God’s purpose. The perversion, misdirection, and disruption of the intended love for God and neighbor is the opening used by the devil to torment humanity and create the warfare that continues to this day.

The triad—world, flesh, and devil—as a description of the arena in which spiritual warfare takes place is firmly rooted in the biblical tradition. The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:1–3, identifies these three as the areas of the battle for humans. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.”

This paper will make use of this threefold lens through which to discuss spiritual warfare and the believer. All believers face this battle, and they do so more than adequately equipped for victory by the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The result of spiritual warfare, because of the work of the Spirit in and through believers, will be victory.

### **Spiritual Warfare and the World**

The biblical writers understand the concept of the world in several ways. They use it to describe the physical world that God created and decreed that it be filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3; John 1:9; Acts 17:24). The world is also used to refer to the land on which humans live, and even the humans who are dwelling there (Matthew 4:8; 24:14; Luke 4:5). The world is that which God so loved that He gave His Son to die for its redemption (John 3:16).

However, because of the sinful orientation of the world, it is opposed to God and His people. The world is also described as the domain of Satan (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and as the world system of God-rejectors and their cherished values (John 17:6; James 4:4; 1 John 5:19).

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are from the New International Version (2011) (NIV) unless otherwise identified.

Therefore, John warns, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15–16).

The apostle Paul was aware of spiritual warfare and the world. He challenged the Roman Christians to “not conform to the pattern of this world,” because allowing the world to dominate hinders being able to approve the will of God in each life (Romans 12:2). The world is the total environment in which humans exist, a world which God created and called good, a world which He loves eternally, but a world that has departed from the plan God had for His creation.

The tragic reality of the record of the fall into sin in Genesis 3 is that the very structural orientation of the world has been altered. The ease of gaining food from the ground was lost so that thorns and thistles make it difficult to bring food from the soil. Childbirth is with severe pain, and human relationships are radically damaged (Genesis 3:16–19). The welcoming and nurturing world God created became threatening, with human death as the final indignity. Paul describes this disoriented world as “subject to frustration” and “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” awaiting the ultimate victory of God (Romans 8:20–22).

The structure and systems of the fallen world express themselves in opposition to the believer. Governments, governmental agencies, and societal and cultural norms conspire to attack the faith of the Christ-follower. Laws and policies have sometimes been implemented that conflict with the principles revealed by God as His will for humans. Racism in all its forms, ethnic arrogance, and unbridled nationalism coalesce to negate the truths of the Bible.

The constant pressure of the world to mold believers into its image is seen in the multiple ways the world advertises and tempts them to depart from their faith commitment. The steady stream of pictures, images, and marketing appeals, some based on the basest of human instinct, must be met by a commitment to spiritual warfare against these worldly forces.

Spiritual warfare in the world is also experienced in the pressure exerted on believers by fellow world dwellers who are not battling against the negative tug of the world. Instead, they have given over to the world’s forces and place pressure on believers to do likewise. As a warning from biblical history to contemporary Christians, Israel was challenged repeatedly by God about the danger of allowing the people of the land of Canaan to lead them away from God to the worship of their gods.

In the warfare between the believer and the evil forces in the world, the resources for victory are spiritual, not political. The apostle John gave the primary challenge for engaging the pressures from the fallen world by saying, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them” (1 John 2:15). Supreme love for God, the antithesis of loving the world, is the antidote to the challenges of the world. Jude’s call for believers to build themselves up in the most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 20) allows the Spirit to pray through them “in accordance with the will of God” (Romans 8:26–27). Such prayer is powerful to bring victory in the spiritual battle in the world.

## Spiritual Warfare and the Flesh

The New Testament uses flesh (*sarx*) to describe human nature and flesh, and body (*soma*) to depict the human body. Often flesh is used to speak of the weaker aspects of human nature, subject to temptation (Matthew 26:41; 2 Peter 2:18). Paul warns against being enslaved by the desires of the flesh (Ephesians 2:3), and challenges believers not to allow their minds to be set on the flesh (Romans 8:5–7).

The warfare with the flesh is with the fallen nature of humankind, which is now directed away from God and His will toward sinful inclinations and desires. In the fall into sin, Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation to have their eyes opened, be like God, and know good and evil (Genesis 3:5). Instead of continuing to recognize God as supreme and allow Him to be the determinant of what is right and wrong, they chose to exalt themselves and to direct their own lives. Such sin caused them to be no longer turned toward God but to be turned inward on themselves. The decision to remove God from His central place in human existence allowed evil to run unchecked, causing desires and passions to lead humankind away from the plan of God. This war with the fallen nature of humans, resisting what God decrees as right, still rages today.

Paul's identification of the acts of the flesh is a reminder that spiritual warfare against the flesh is crucial for the believer. The list in Galatians 5:19–21, "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like," is illustrative of the fallen human nature. The challenge in the warfare against the flesh is to crucify the passions and desires of the flesh and to live by and keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:24–25).

The salvation provided by Christ grants freedom to the believer, but Paul cautions against using that freedom wrongly by indulging the flesh. Such indulgence denies the absolute expectation on the believer to "serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13). The direction of the unchecked flesh is to broken relationships and personal harm, which are antithetical to the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers. The tragic reality is that the flesh desires that which is against the Spirit, so to succeed in the warfare against the flesh, the believer must "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16–17).

The apostle Paul clearly states the biblical view of flesh, noting that the sinful passions are at work, leading to death (Romans 7:5). The danger is that even though individuals have become believers, they could refuse to set their minds on the Spirit, choosing instead to yield to the desires of the flesh. Continuing refusal to allow the Spirit to govern their lives results in spiritual death because the flesh is hostile to God (Romans 8:5–8). Warring with the flesh grows out of the recognition that the work of Christ has dealt a mortal blow to the flesh. The believer engages in spiritual warfare against the flesh by choosing to allow the Spirit to lead, guide, and direct all their living. The Spirit provides resurrection life to the believer so that victory in the spiritual battle against the flesh can be realized (Romans 8:9–13).

Victory is gained over the flesh as the Spirit empowers one to overcome the desires of the flesh and its sinful activities. As the believer continues to allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide them, He increasingly produces Christian character in their lives (Galatians 5:22–23). These fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—evidence victory in the spiritual warfare with the flesh.

## Spiritual Warfare and the Devil

Some may question theologically and practically if spiritual warfare against the devil is real and relevant to their lives and ministries. The consensus of Assemblies of God thought is that an unseen enemy, the devil, exists and is devoted to opposing God and destroying humanity. Immediately after He was anointed with the Holy Spirit to begin His public ministry, Jesus experienced a personal confrontation with the devil (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). Later, Peter summarized Jesus' ministry: "He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (Acts 10:38). The devil confronted Jesus repeatedly (Luke 4:13), and Christ's representatives should expect no less. The war was and is real.

The biblical writers evidence belief in the existence of the devil, whom they depict as a personal entity. He is described as a serpent in the confrontation with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Capable of knowledge, speech, and persuasion, all indicators of a personal entity, he tempted them, and they fell into sin. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, he conversed with Jesus, even using Scriptures, in the effort to divert Jesus from His mission (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13).

The devil is the adversary, a liar, and a deceiver. His opposition to God, His plan, and His people is fierce and relentless. However, the devil and the demonic forces allied with him are limited. They are not divine and lack the complete knowledge God expresses, they are not able to be present everywhere at the same time, and they are subject to God and His people. They do not have guaranteed access to human thoughts. The believer must be aware of their evil intentions and activities but should not fear them.

When God confronted Adam and Eve about their choice to turn away from His ultimate guidance and direction, to fall into sin and introduce sin to the entire human race, He pronounced the ultimate destiny of the devil. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Revelation 19 and 20 make it clear that the devil and those demonic forces allied with him are destined for destruction.

The conflict between the believer and demonic forces can be understood as a spectrum of demonic influence, ranging in the degree of domination over a person's life and in the variety of aspects of life where demonic control has taken place. The impact of demonic powers may be slight and almost undetectable. If one repents, forsakes their sin and carnal activities, resists temptation, and calls upon the Spirit to cleanse and deliver, victory and freedom will be obtained. The extreme influence of the demonic could be called "possession" in which a person is controlled by demonic forces who manipulate the individual's body, mind, and spirit for their destructive purposes.<sup>2</sup> This extreme case of demonic control is indicative of continued movement away from, and abandonment of, a personal relationship with Jesus; the believer should gain victory in the spiritual conflict well before this extreme and not be subject to it. While believers will engage in spiritual warfare and will be oppressed, they cannot be possessed by the demonic forces.

Great care must be taken not to confuse emotional and mental illnesses with demonic activity. While the demonic activity may mimic the behavior exhibited in mental illness, to assert that they are the same can bring harm to individuals, preventing them from receiving the medical care needed. The wise counsel of godly doctors, counselors, and psychologists can be of assistance

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<sup>2</sup> With demon possession, the power of Satan takes control of the center of an individual's personality. In such lives, demons can manifest themselves through temporary changes in personality, speech, bizarre physical behavior, physical and mental affliction, and self-destructive tendencies.

in discerning the actual condition. The powerful and all-wise Holy Spirit provides discernment and wisdom to those who minister to humans facing this severe challenge.

There are those who teach that each instance in the biblical material that references “spirit” or “spirit of” refers to demonic activity. Most often the biblical writers use *spirit* to identify an attitude or a disposition. For example, David spoke of a broken spirit (Psalm 51:17), Solomon of being lowly in spirit (Proverbs 16:19), and Paul wanted to come to Corinth with love and a gentle spirit (1 Corinthians 4:21). It would be better to treat uses of “spirit” and “spirit of” as designations of attitudes and dispositions, some of which could be sinful unless the context of the passage shows that an independent spirit-being is meant.

The teaching that demonic activity includes authority over geographical areas is based on the incident recorded in Daniel 10. Daniel received a divine messenger who had been delayed by the resistance of the “prince of the Persian kingdom” for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:13). This is a difficult passage to interpret, but even if the prince of the Persian kingdom is a demonic entity, a singular reference is not a solid basis for creating teaching about territorial demonic activity.

The authors of the Gospels detail numerous specific encounters between Jesus and demons. In each case, He was in command and provided the needed deliverance for the human tormented by the demonic forces. It would not be correct to deduce a set formula for encounters with the demonic from the examples of Jesus, because His actions were varied. For instance, He only asked the name of the demons once (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30). In that same encounter, He allowed the demons to choose where He would send them—into the pigs (Matthew 8:31; Mark 5:11–12; Luke 8:32). There are other instances in which He did not permit the demons to speak (Mark 1:34; Luke 4:35, 41). The Gospel writers frequently noted that He healed and delivered from demons (e.g., Matthew 4:34), but He did not identify every human malady with demonic possession.

There are some positive lessons from the accounts of Jesus’ victorious encounters with demons. He identified the Holy Spirit as the source of His casting out demons (Matthew 12:28; the “finger of God” in Luke 11:20), indicating the arrival of the kingdom of God. After delivering the young boy as He returned from the Mount of Transfiguration, He pointed to the necessity of faith and prayer (Matthew 17:20–21; Mark 9:29). In every case, Jesus’ voice was the command that drove demonic forces out of humans.

James provides a powerful means by which the believer can defeat the devil in spiritual warfare: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). As believers recognize their full dependence on the power of God and that the devil cannot stand before that power, they can refuse to allow the devil any place in their lives. Peter summarizes warfare with the devil by saying, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8–9).

### **Pastoral Implications**

Spiritual warfare in the world, with the flesh, and with the devil is a reality for Christ-followers. Pastoral leadership has the privilege of preparing congregational members for, and encouraging them in, this battle. The Pentecostal reality of Spirit-filled and enabled living is crucial for overcoming the attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Leading the congregation into this Spirit-dependent living is vital. The ongoing growth of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) and the allowance for the expression of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–11) in the lives of believers are of paramount importance. Encouraging Christ-followers to allow the Holy Spirit to

pray and praise through them in a heavenly language opens the will and purposes of God to strengthen each for the challenges faced in spiritual warfare (Romans 8:26–27; Jude 20).

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul challenged believers in spiritual warfare “to put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:11). Spiritual warfare is not against humans; instead, it is with spiritual forces of evil. Standing against such is possible because of the armor provided by God— “the belt of truth . . . the breastplate of righteousness . . . feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace . . . the shield of faith . . . the helmet of salvation . . . the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:14–17). Paul concluded the presentation of the resources provided the believer for spiritual warfare with a reminder of the power of prayer in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18).

There are some in congregations with emotional and mental challenges which might be helped by medical and counseling professionals. In some instances, the medical profession could be of more assistance than a deliverance ministry. Making use of professional help would not be instead of fervent prayer and intercession. God has the power to heal all of humanity’s illnesses. Great care and dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit are needed to determine the best path toward wholeness and healing.

Congregations have the privilege of not only being strengthened to fight personally but also to engage spiritual warfare in a corporate act of intercession. The battle with the world often must be carried on at the systems or structural level. Evil expresses itself through corporate practices, governmental decisions, and cultural traditions. The body of Christ can see the victory of God through intercessory prayer and actions as needed.

The apostle Paul provided the assurance needed for all believers as they engage in spiritual warfare. “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:31–32, 37). Peter, as he begins his second epistle, provided this great assurance: “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3).