

## Spiritual Warfare in African Pentecostalism in the Light of Ephesians

Kevin G. Smith

### Abstract

Western Evangelicals tend to affirm belief in demonic spirits in theory, but live as if they do not exist. By contrast, African neo-Pentecostals take the reality and the risks of insidious spiritual powers seriously. A central feature of the worldview (cosmology) of these churches is the heartfelt belief that evil, hostile spiritual beings exert a real influence on the physical realm. Much of the liturgy of these churches centres around the spiritual conflict between believers and demonic forces. Ephesians was written primarily to Gentile followers of Jesus Christ. With respect to their cosmology, these Gentile converts held similar beliefs to African converts. Paul, it seems, shares the basic cosmology of his readers, but with a counter-cultural perspective on the impact of Christ's victorious death and resurrection on the interface between spiritual powers and those 'in Christ'. Ephesians affirms the neo-Pentecostal belief in the powers of evil, but offers a different framework for spiritual warfare.

### About the Author<sup>1</sup>

*D.Litt, University of Stellenbosch; PhD, SATS.*

Kevin is the Principal at the South African Theological Seminary. His research interests are broad within the domain of theology, although studying and teaching the Bible is his first love.

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## 1. Introduction

I recently preached an expository sermon from Ephesians 1:15–23 in a staunchly evangelical, somewhat charismatic church in Johannesburg, a multicultural congregation. I did my best to explain that Christ is exalted above all evil spirits. Therefore, the key to living free of fear is for us as God’s children to realise that if we are in Christ, we are blessed (Eph 1:3–14) and we need not fear demonic curses. This appears to be the plain meaning of Ephesians 1. After the service, a lovely sister whom I knew to be a committed follower of Jesus came to speak to me. She confessed her ongoing struggle with fear of the spirit realm, and vowed to go home and destroy her amulets used to ward off evil forces.

This lady’s story is commonplace amongst African Christians in evangelical churches. Many love Jesus but continue to live in fear of the spirit world, possibly still resorting to African traditional remedies for protection against curses and oppression. The cerebral Christianity we proclaim is somehow insufficient. African Pentecostal churches often go to the other extreme, embracing a warfare worldview in which the entire Christian life is seen as a war with evil spirits. Believers are responsible to enforce their God-given authority through combat prayer.

Ephesians is the ideal biblical text to critique both of these responses to the spirit world. Ephesians was written primarily to Gentile followers of Jesus Christ. With respect to their cosmology, these Gentile converts held similar beliefs to African converts. Paul, it seems, shares the basic cosmology of his readers, but with a counter-cultural perspective on the impact of Christ’s victorious death and resurrection on the interface between spiritual powers and those ‘in Christ’. Ephesians affirms the neo-Pentecostal belief in the powers of evil, but offers a different framework for spiritual warfare. The purpose of this article is to unpack how Ephesians views the spirit world and spiritual warfare, believing that it offers the biblical blueprint for all Christians and serves to correct the opposite errors espoused by Western cerebral evangelicalism and by African neo-Pentecostalism.

## 2. The Impotence of Cerebral Christianity

Kwame Bediako (2005:3) argues that ‘Christian theology in the West made its peace with the Enlightenment ... by drawing a line between ... the spiritual world ... and the material world’. The resultant ‘cerebral Christianity’ (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004:374) came to dominate the historic mission churches, but it did not transplant well into African soil, because ‘African life operates within a

worldview that is different from the one that takes its cue from Western intellectual history' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:310). The anti-supernatural, rationalistic presuppositions that dominate Western scholarship deny the reality of evil spirits except as constructs of the human imagination (Ferdinando 1999:70).

Unlike liberal scholars, Western evangelicals affirm belief in the devil and in evil spirits in their theology, but the worldview that informs their praxis often belies the reality of that affirmation. In practice, Western missionaries exhibit a 'dismissive attitude [towards] the effects of evil spirits among African societies' (Adewuya 2012:253). Both Asamoah-Gyadu and Adewuya quote E. A. Asamoah's now famous assessment:

It is no exaggeration to say that the church's attitude towards African beliefs has generally been one of negation, a denial of the validity of those beliefs. ...

Anybody who knows the African Christian intimately will know that no amount of denial on the part of the church will expel belief in supernatural powers from the minds of the African people. (Asamoah 1955:297)

This anti-supernatural rationalism stands in stark contrast to the dominant view of the spirit world in Africa. In Africa, belief in evil spirits is ubiquitous. Almost all Africans believe that evil spirits are real, and that they play a role in all that happens. In particular, insidious spirits either cause or exploit everything evil that happens, such as sickness, misfortune, and calamity (Asamoah 1955; Asamoah-Gyadu 2004, 2007; Adewuya 2012; Arnett 2017).

Therefore, to meet the felt needs of Africans, a religion must offer a solution to the prevalent and pervasive fear of malevolent spirits. Cerebral Christianity fails dismally by denying the demonic, shunning the supernatural, excluding the experiential, and relegating the religious to the private sphere. African Traditional Religion (ATR) fares much better. It acknowledges the holistic, inter-linked nature of the universe. It acknowledges the reality of the spirit world and offers ways to appease and pacify spiritual powers (Arnett 2017:35), not by warring against them but by honouring and venerating them.

For Christianity to flourish amongst Africans, it must provide an answer to the impact of the spirit world upon daily life.

### 3. Spiritual Warfare in African Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism has prevailed<sup>2</sup> in Africa precisely because it promises protection and freedom from the power of evil spirits.

<sup>2</sup> There is no longer any debate about this. Pentecostal-Charismatic expressions of Christianity are dominant on the continent. This is acknowledged by friend and foe alike. For instance, Asamoah-Gyadu celebrates the pentecostalisation of mainline churches while Arnett laments the same, but neither denies the fact that the Christian faith in Africa wears Pentecostal-Charismatic garb.

African ‘Pentecostals differ from other Christian traditions not simply because they believe in “speaking in tongues” but also because they emphasize the grace of the Holy Spirit in helping the believer overcome the debilitating influences of evil’ (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:306).

Pentecostals offer a better solution to the problem of evil spirits than does ATR. The supreme being in ATR is distant; lesser spiritual powers must be appeased, pacified, and venerated to secure safety and avoid adversity. Pentecostals proclaim an all-powerful God who intervenes in daily life to save, deliver, and heal. ‘Simply, the same God who intervened in the Bible intervenes today. God’s presence brings the supernatural to daily life. This experiential worldview permeates all aspects of the Pentecostal movement’ (Arnett 2017:34). To experience God’s salvation is to receive not just eternal life, but also deliverance, healing, and blessing in this life.

#### 4. Spiritual Warfare in Ephesians

Ephesians was written to Gentile converts who came out of paganism. The letter has two interrelated purposes: to persuade Gentile converts of their equal identity in Christ and of their authority over evil spirits. It contains the most direct and extensive teaching found in any New Testament letter about believers’ spiritual warfare against the devil and his demonic hordes. Although most commentators recognise this to some extent, Western interpreters are somewhat blinded to its centrality to the message and argument of the letter because of their disbelief in the spirit world. Even Western evangelicals, who believe that the devil and his minions are real and personal, fail to appreciate how central the theme of power over evil spirits is in the everyday lives of those saved out of a religious worldview in which these conflicts shape all of life.

The believers to whom Paul<sup>3</sup> wrote Ephesians had much more in common with African Pentecostals than with Western evangelicals. The pride of place that their pre-conversion worldview placed upon the threat posed by the powers of darkness is intuitively understood by African converts, who experience similar fears and insecurities, but it remains foreign to most Western Christians. Arnold (1992:122) argues that ‘many converts were streaming into the churches—converts who were formerly affiliated with the Artemis cult, practiced magic, consulted astrologers, and participated in various mysteries. Underlying the former beliefs and manner of life of all these converts was a

**3** The author is aware of the scepticism with which many liberal scholars treat Pauline authorship, but accepts the truth claims of the text as innocent until proven guilty. Since many have presented able defences of the plausibility—actually, the probability—of Pauline authorship (e.g. Thielman 2010; Baugh 2015), this scepticism reveals more about the said critics’ inherent distrust of the biblical text than it does about the historical authorship of Ephesians. If a text claims that Paul wrote it and the plausibility of the claim is adequately demonstrated, why would someone reject the claim?

common fear of the demonic powers.’ Before they met Jesus, they believed that an assortment of anthropomorphic gods, impersonal forces, and personal spirit-beings controlled the fate of human beings and the destiny of nations (Keener 2014). Fear of such deities was pervasive and paralysing, as was honouring and appeasing them to avert curses and bring social or political blessings. Many people tried to control demonic powers through magic (Thielman 2010:105–8).

If the preceding premises are conceded—(1) the audience of Ephesians shares a view and experience of the spirit world with African converts and (2) a central focus of Paul’s purpose was to help them to live in victory over the spirit world—then it will be instructive to examine the strategy for spiritual warfare that Paul presents in the letter and to compare it with the strategies being practised by African Pentecostals.

### **1. The reality that evil spirits exist**

Many liberal scholars dismiss talk about Satan and evil spirits as premodern superstition. The materialistic, rationalistic, scientific worldview leaves no room for the spirit world. They demythologise biblical allusions to the devil and his demons as personifications of impersonal forces at work in the world, what Wink (cited in Adewuya 2012:255) terms the ‘collective symbolization of evil’ and a ‘the collective weight of human fallenness’. They dismiss references to demonization as an unenlightened way of describing mental pathology (Adewuya 2012:255).

By contrast, Ephesians unequivocally teaches that evil spirits, including the devil, are real, personal, and evil. Paul uses four terms to refer to Satan in Ephesians: ‘the ruler of the kingdom of the air’ (2:2), ‘the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient’ (2:2), ‘the devil’ (4:27; 6:11), and ‘the evil one’ (6:16). He refers to lesser evil spirits under the authority of Satan in 1:21 (‘all rule and authority, power and dominion’), 3:11 (‘the rulers and authorities’), and 6:12 (‘against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil’). In each case, the phrase ‘in the heavenly realms’ positions these rulers and authorities, which Paul depicts as real, personal evil spirits, as operating within the spiritual realm.

### **2. The risk that evil spirits pose**

The amount of attention Paul dedicates to the believers’ conflict with evil spirits in Ephesians surely indicates that he considers them a *real* danger. The devil may be a vanquished foe, but he remains a wounded buffalo capable of taking others down with

him. Therefore, Paul urgently exhorts believers to put on the armour of God so that they can stand against him and withstand his assaults.

If Christ has conquered and believers share in his victory, what threat do evil spirits pose to the people of God?

In Ephesians 1:19–23, Paul asserts that evil spirits in the heavenly realms do not have power or authority over believers. Christ has been exalted over them and he exercises his authority for the church. The intimation seems to be that evil spirits do not, as a general rule, have the right to torment or oppress believers physically. Scripture mentions some exceptions in which God granted permission (Job 1:6–12; Job 2:4–6; Luke 22:31), but the enemy can only afflict and torment believers if (a) God grants permission or (b) the victim opens the door through sin (Eph 4:26–27).

In Ephesians 2:1–2, we learn that Satan is ‘the ruler of the kingdom of the air’. He influences (perhaps even controls or establishes) ‘the ways of this world’. He is ‘the spirit who is ... at work in those who are disobedient’. Evil spirits under Satan’s command exert a deep influence on cultures outside of Christ. Unbelievers follow their ways and they work in those who are disobedient. Since cultures and mores continue to influence believers, this aspect of the devil’s work remains a danger. This is why, long after they have come to know Christ, the Ephesian believers still need to be reminded ‘that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking’ (4:17).

In Ephesians 4:26–27, believers are cautioned not to ‘give the devil a foothold’ in their lives or their relationships. The indication is that unresolved anger somehow grants the devil leverage that he can exploit against the believer. The exact nature of the ‘foothold’ or leverage is not revealed. Perhaps it takes the form of what Pentecostals call a *stronghold*—a room in the house [of a person’s life] that is not yielded to Christ and over which the enemy exerts some control. Perhaps it is the leverage to exploit a small break in a relationship to drive a wedge between brothers and sisters in Christ. What is clear is that the enemy leverages sin against God’s people.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Ephesians 6:10–20 offers some clues as to the kinds of threat the forces of darkness pose. Believers are urged to ‘stand against the devil’s schemes’. The dominant biblical portrayal of Satan is as a schemer and a trickster, a liar and a deceiver. Deception is his greatest weapon against believers, a truth that dominates Paul’s allusions to the devil, as a brief survey of his

<sup>4</sup> Although the allusion to giving the devil a foothold is specifically linked to the sin of anger, verses 25–32 present five areas of sin and three generic statements that apply distributively to all five areas of sin. The three generic statements are ‘because we are members of one body’ (25), ‘and do not give the devil a foothold’ (27), and ‘do not grieve the Holy Spirit’ (30). Although each of these is linked to a specific sin, all three apply distributively to all the sins. Thus *lying* (25), *anger* (26), *stealing* (28), *unwholesome talk* (29), and *bitterness* (31) all (a) divide the body of Christ, (b) give the devil a foothold, and (c) grieve the Holy Spirit.

allusions to the enemy shows. Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning (2 Cor 11:3). Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). As the god of this world, he blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot understand the gospel (2 Cor 4:4). In the Pastorals, the trap of the devil is a threat to believers (1 Tim 3:6–7; 5:15; 2 Tim 2:26).

The overall picture is that the enemy's primary weapons against God's children are the power of seduction and the power of deception; there is no clear indication in Ephesians that demonic powers wield the power of oppression over believers. In other words, Satan can harm believers by deceiving them with error or by seducing them to sin, but he does not have the authority to curse them or oppress them. Nevertheless, along with almost all Africans and all Pentecostals, Paul affirms that we have a real enemy—he is really dangerous and we are engaged in a real struggle. If we are not alert to his schemes, we can be deceived or seduced.

### **3. The revelation that evil spirits fear**

Writing to converts who harbour similar fears and insecurities to African converts, Paul's prayer strategy in Ephesians 1:15–23 may surprise. He prays that the Father may give them 'the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him'. He pleads that 'the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened so that they may *know*' three things:

1. the hope of his calling,
2. the riches of his inheritance, and
3. the greatness of his power.

The main focus of his prayer falls upon the *power* God provides to believers, power to live free of fear with respect to powers and principalities. In verses 19–23 Paul unpacks how Christ has been exalted above all other spiritual beings in the heavenly realms and exercises his power and authority on behalf of his people. Therefore, those who are in Christ have no need to fear evil spirits.

The striking thing is that Paul does not resort to so-called 'combat prayer' or 'warfare prayer' as the means to helping the Ephesian believers to live victoriously. He prays for the Lord to grant them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. He prays, in effect, that they may fully grasp what Christ has done for them on the cross and what he continues to do for them from his exalted position in the heavenlies. The premise is clear: if they fully grasp the gospel, they will have no fear of the devil.

#### 4. The righteousness that evil spirits despise

The hortatory portion of Ephesians, 4:1–6:9, may initially seem unrelated to the theme of spiritual warfare. It is governed by the metaphor *to walk* (περιπατέω). John Stott's (1989) argument that Paul's chief aim is to secure the unity and purity of the body of Christ fits the letter well, especially the theme of Gentile identity. Although the theme of spiritual warfare is not front and centre, neither is it absent from the apostle's mind.

In Ephesians 4:27 he warns the church not 'to give the devil a foothold' through sin. If my earlier contention is correct that the purpose of the letter is to assure Gentile converts of their security in Christ, who has conquered evil spirits (4:8), then the enormous focus on walking in love, walking in the light, walking in wisdom, and walking in the Spirit constitutes *spiritual warfare*. Sin is the primary chink in our spiritual armour which grants the devil leverage against us and our people, the unified church.

In June 2017, I was in Ghana at the ICHE<sup>5</sup> conference. One Ghanaian speaker was reflecting about a conundrum they face in their country: 70 per cent of Ghanaians are deeply spiritual (Pentecostal-style) Christians, yet they face epidemic levels of corruption in their society. The speaker lamented that 'Ghanaians are very religious but not very righteous'. When it comes to their worship and spiritual warfare, Ghanaian Pentecostals dedicate tremendous energy to combat prayer, which is supposed to ward off evil spirits. Paul's primary view about how to ward off evil spirits and prevent curses was not so much about combat prayer as it was about Christlike purity. Our security resides in *our walk* more than in *our weapons*. Our safety is secured by purity, not by prayer. (I believe that prayer remains important, but prayer apart from purity is ineffective in fending off demonic powers.)

5 International Council for Higher Education

#### 5. The resistance that evil spirits flee

Paul teaches at length in Ephesians 6:10–20 about resisting evil spirits, using the language of 'stand' (στήναι) and 'withstand' (ἀντιστήναι). When Paul comes to unpacking the actual means by which believers withstand their onslaught, he emphasises defensive armour suited for warding off the twin attacks of deception and temptation, 'the belt of truth' and the 'breastplate of righteousness'. Believers need to know what God has done for them through the gospel, and stand firm in the salvation they have received. Unwavering faith in the work of Christ and in the Word of God extinguishes the fiery darts of the evil one. As depicted in Ephesians 6, the kind of spiritual warfare that withstands evil assaults is the same kind that Paul portrays



throughout the letter—knowing and understanding what God has done for believers in Christ, and walking in righteousness that does not give the devil a foothold.

Perhaps the major, central theme of the letter focuses on the victory and authority of Christ over spiritual powers (1:19–2:10 and *passim*). Interestingly, read through African eyes, the depiction of salvation in 2:4–6 not only stresses the believers’ union with Christ as the key to victory, but also resonates with the African understanding of salvation as including the power of God to ‘save from’ and ‘save with’. Although the notions of deliverance and healing are not specifically mentioned, in the light of the biblical account of Jesus’s ministry and that of the apostles, it does not stretch the imagination to believe that Paul left room for their being part of what it means to declare ‘God saved us ... and raised us up ... and seated us in the heavenly realms’. If these notions are present in Ephesians 2, then the deliverance secured is *by grace through faith*—it is part and parcel of true conversion.

The notion of being *seated in the heavenly realms* conveys a sense of peace in the presence of enemies, reminiscent of Psalm 23. The imagery presupposes a battle won (by Christ), not a struggle in progress. The themes of *sitting* (Eph 2:1–10) and *struggling* (Eph 6:10–20) may balance each other to create a holistic vision of how victory is secured.

What causes evil spirits to flee? Mark Bubeck (1975) put it most succinctly when he said, ‘It is not the prayers of the saints that Satan fears, but the presence of the Shepherd!’ There is a famous anecdote about Smith Wigglesworth. He woke up one night and observed a strange phenomenon in the room. Recognising it as the devil, he allegedly said, ‘Oh, it’s only you,’ before he lay down and went back to sleep. This is the kind of resistance that causes evil spirits to flee. They flee from believers who know that they are secure in Christ, believers who are in right standing with Christ through the gospel and through walking uprightly. There is no biblical evidence to suggest that the enemy flees from so-called ‘warfare prayer’ (Davis 2007:92–95), which is the dominant approach to spiritual warfare in African neo-Pentecostal churches (Arnett 2017).

## 5. Conclusion

Ephesians has much to teach both Western Evangelicals and African Pentecostals about warfare with evil spirits. Contrary to cerebral Christianity, which denies (in practice if not in theory) the reality and danger that evil spirits pose, Ephesians clearly

portrays the devil and his demons as real and dangerous. In this respect, it stands in agreement with the African traditional worldview, in which spirit beings are known to be real and powerful.

However, Ephesians diverges sharply from the beliefs and practices observed in African neo-Pentecostalism with respect to how to overcome evil spirits. The Bible paints a different portrait of the nature of the threat evil spirits pose to believers and the means by which they are overcome to the beliefs that undergird the neo-Pentecostal practice of combat prayer. Scripture emphasises Christ's complete victory over demonic powers, which believers share by virtue of being in Christ. The devil has no authority to afflict or to curse those who are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3–14). Satan's weapons against God's people are deception and temptation. Living victorious results from a deep, Spirit-illuminated grasp of the supremacy of Christ and his victory in the gospel.

## Reference List

Adewuya JA 2012. The spiritual powers of Ephesians 6:10–18 in the light of African Pentecostal spirituality. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22(2):251–58.

Arnett R 2017. *Pentecostalization: The evolution of Baptists in Africa*. Eldon: Randy Arnett.

Arnold CE 1992. *Ephesians: Power and magic—The concept of power in Ephesians in the light of its historical setting*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Asamoah EA 1955. The Christian church and African heritage, international review of missions. *International Review of Mission* 44(175):292–301.

Asamoah-Gyadu JK 2004. Faith, healing, and mission: Reflections on a consultative process. *International Review of Mission* 93(370–371):372–78.

——— 2007. Pulling down strongholds: Evangelism, principalities and powers, and the African Pentecostal imagination. *International Review of Mission* 96(372–373):306–17.

Baugh SM 2015. *Ephesians*. Bellingham: Lexham.

Bediako K 2005. Worship as vital participation: Some personal reflections on ministry in the African church. *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8(2):3–7.

Bubeck M 1975. *The adversary*. Chicago: Moody.

Davis KL 2007. Contemporary spiritual warfare and missiology. *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 11:77–118.

Ferdinando K 1999. *The triumph of Christ in African perspective: A study of demonology and redemption in the African Context*. Carlisle: Paternoster.

Keener CS 2014. *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Downers Grove: IVP.

Stott J 1989. *The message of Ephesians*. The Bible speaks today. Leicester: IVP.

Thielman F 2010. *Ephesians*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker.