

7-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Brooks, W. (2011). Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's Approach to Missions. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 3(1), 97-113. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol3/iss1/8>

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**PAULINE SPIRITUAL WARFARE: HOW A WARFARE MENTALITY
SHAPED PAUL'S APPROACH TO MISSIONS**

Will Brooks

abstract

Paul's understanding of the condition of nonbelievers and his understanding of how Satan attacks believers is explained in this article. In support of this effort the biblical data is examined and lessons arising from the Pauline corpus in relation to these two issues are noted. Paul's perspective on these two issues is explored as it relates to his missiological practice. The article, then, concludes with some contemporary applications of this study as they affect current missiological practices.

introduction

The opening line of Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," states, "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal."¹ As Luther's hymn indicates, this adversary, who Scripture calls Satan, is a powerful spiritual being.

¹ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," in *The Baptist Hymnal*, ed. Wesley L. Forbis (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 8.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8
Satan uses all his might and all his resources to prevent the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

In his letters, the apostle Paul often speaks about the nature and work of Satan. Paul conveys a warfare mentality that sees the kingdom of God in constant conflict with the kingdom of Satan. Though we often read Paul's letters as if he were primarily a theologian, in reality, he was foremost a missionary.² Paul's missionary heart permeates his letters, and most of the letters emerge from a missionary context.³

If Paul's letters, then, should be read with his missionary context in mind, how does this affect how we understand what he writes about Satan? The thesis of this article is that Paul's warfare mentality shapes his understanding of the missionary task. I will support this thesis by looking at Paul's understanding of the condition of nonbelievers and his understanding of Satan's attacks against believers. At the end of each of these sections, I will state how these understandings affected Paul's missionary work. In a concluding section, I will explain how the study as a whole applies to contemporary missions praxis.

Three presuppositions need to be made clear before starting. First, I understand the primary task of missions to be the preaching of the gospel. In the discussions that deal with Paul's missionary work and the impact of Paul's understanding of Satan on his missionary work, I understand Paul's primary motivation in missions as the taking of the gospel to the peoples of the world who have never heard of the name of Jesus Christ (Rom 15:20). His major goal was to see churches planted among these peoples.⁴

Second, while this paper is about Satan, the Scriptures are not about Satan but about God. While Paul's demonology is highly developed, it is his Christology that drives everything he does. New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner is correct when he writes, "Magnifying God in Christ was the animating principle of Paul's life and the foundational principle of his theology."⁵ The focus of this paper represents a thin slice of the overall spectrum that is Pauline theology.

Third, the terms Satan, the Devil, and the Enemy are used interchangeably to refer to the being who is the head of all evil forces. When demons or evil spiritual beings are discussed, they are understood as subservient to Satan.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 124; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2001), 37, 39; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2008), 123–124.

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 2006), 49.

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 28–29.

⁵ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 37.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's understanding of the state of non-believers

Paul was familiar with Satan's tactics. In his missionary work, he was often confronted with the work of Satan in the lives of men. His understanding of Satan affected how he looked at nonbelievers. Paul's letters reveal that he saw nonbelievers as people who belong to Satan and who are enslaved to the demonic.

belong to satan

Paul understood unbelievers as members of Satan's kingdom. He explained that redemption is the transfer of allegiance from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the Son (Col 1:13). Paul clearly placed the wise rule of Christ in opposition to the harsh rule of Satan.⁶ Before coming to Christ in faith, one belongs to Satan's kingdom and is in need of deliverance.

Paul also recognized that Satan blinds nonbelievers to the truths of the gospel. He wrote of this blinding work of Satan in 2 Corinthians 4:4 when he referred to Satan as "the god of this world."⁷ Paul stated that Satan "blinded the minds of unbelievers," leaving them unable to comprehend the beauty of Christ revealed in the gospel. It is not due to a fault in the gospel that some are perishing, but it is due to their own sinfulness combined with the blinding work of Satan. While unbelievers may be able to comprehend that the gospel is primarily concerned with Christ, the blinding work of Satan leaves them unable to perceive the glory and majesty of a bloodied Savior slain for sinners.⁸

While Paul saw unbelievers as members of Satan's kingdom who are blinded by Satan from seeing the glory of Christ, he also recognized that they were followers of Satan. Paul explained in Ephesians 2:1–3 that the devil, the flesh, and the world work together against humans.⁹ He stated that unbelievers are following the course of this world, which he further explained in saying that they are "following the prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2). With this phrase, Paul was referring to

99

⁶ Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philippians Colossians Philemon*, ed. David S. Dockery, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 207; N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Canon Leon Morris, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 62.

⁷ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 29 (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 211; Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 137; Clinton E. Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, *3 Crucial Questions*, ed. Grant R. Osborne and Richard J. Jones Jr., vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 20; Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan & Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 184. All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001).

⁸ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 137–38; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 184; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 327.

⁹ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 32–37; Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 139.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8
Satan and the power he exerts over humanity.¹⁰ All unbelievers are described as
fallen after Satan, doing his will, and walking in his ways.

Paul also understood unbelievers as captured by Satan to do his will. In Paul's second letter to Timothy, he encouraged Timothy to extend grace to his opponents so that they might eventually be saved. He went on to describe these opponents as within "the snare of the devil" and as "captured by him to do his will" (2 Tim 2:26). Unbelievers are not neutral but are unwittingly accomplishing the will of Satan.¹¹ Guthrie notes that the metaphor Paul used shows that Satan is "the intoxicator and captivator of men's minds."¹² Paul understood that unbelievers belong to Satan and that their lives accomplish his will.

enslaved by the demonic

100

While Paul understood unbelievers as belonging to Satan, he also saw them as enslaved by the demonic forces of this world. Galatians 4:3 conveys this idea when stating that before becoming Christians, the Galatians "were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world." While some commentators interpret *ta stoiceila* as referring to the law or to the basic principles of life,¹³ it is best understood as a reference to demonic beings.¹⁴ Paul was convinced that unbelievers are slaves to this "sinister coalition of evil powers."¹⁵

Verse eight goes on to explain that before believing in Christ, the Galatian Christians "were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." Now that they are in Christ, however, these believers have a right standing with God and are no longer slaves to these demonic beings. Paul then followed this statement by asking the Galatians how they could possibly want to turn back to the *stoiceila* (elementary principles). The following statement in verse ten clarifies how they are turning back to the elementary principles, namely by requiring observance of certain festivals as a requirement for salvation.¹⁶

For Paul, salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone (Gal 2:16). To elevate anything other than faith as necessary for salvation, including circumcision or the observance of Jewish rituals, is contrary to the gospel and demonically inspired.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 138; Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities & Powers in Paul's Letters*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 112; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 185.

¹¹ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 138.

¹² Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Canon Leon Morris, 2d ed., The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, no. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 167.

¹³ L. Ann Jervis, *Galatians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 109; Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, ed. Terry Muck, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 204; Cole 1989:160.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 131–33; Timothy George, *Galatians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman), 312.

¹⁵ George, *Galatians*, 295.

¹⁶ Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 131.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's Unbelievers are, by nature, enslaved to these types of teachings, thinking that salvation must be earned by rituals and cultic practices.

Not only did Paul understand unbelievers as enslaved through demonically inspired teaching, he also understood them as enslaved through their fellowship with demonically inspired idols. Paul saw idolatry as the ultimate rejection of God's rule over creation, an open act of rebellion against the true and living God (Rom 1:23).¹⁷ He likewise saw salvation as a turning away from idols to the living God (1 Thess 1:9).

Paul dealt extensively with idolatry in First Corinthians. After becoming Christians, the Corinthian believers were faced with difficult decisions related to how they should interact with the non-believing world around them. They wondered if they should participate in the celebrations of the people when idol worship was involved.¹⁸ They also wondered how they should respond when offered food that was sacrificed to idols. These believers sent Paul a letter asking him these questions. First Corinthians 7:1–16:4 is Paul's answer to their questions.

Paul explained the significance of eating food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. He argued that believers have the freedom to eat food offered to idols since idols have no real existence—they are simply tools that demons use to keep unbelievers enslaved. At the same time, however, believers must exercise caution not to destroy the conscience of a less mature believer who may consider the idol as having some existence, and thus, he considers the eating of such food as polluting and contaminating.¹⁹ Although these idols have no real existence, the gods that inspire and empower them do. Nonetheless, they are inferior in comparison with the true, living God.²⁰

Later in the letter, Paul explained that non-Christian religions, which he refers to as idolatry, are demonically inspired. Paul explained this truth in 1 Corinthians 10:20–21 where he stated that “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.” Idols are more than simply the work of human hands; they are empowered by the demonic.²¹ Paul then explained that the participation believers have in these festivities is participation with demons. In terms of unbelievers, then, it is clear that Paul understood them as being in fellowship with the demonic through their participation in non-Christian religions.

¹⁷ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 160.

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 164, 176, 180–84.

¹⁹ A. Scott Moreau, “Contextualization, Syncretism and Spiritual Warfare: Identifying the Issues,” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn Van Rheenen, vol. 13, EMS (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006), 51.

²⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 140.

²¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 480; Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare*, 153.

In considering Paul's understanding of unbelievers, it is important to note that despite the fact that Paul understood unbelievers as belonging to Satan and enslaved by the demonic, he never lessened their personal responsibility for their own sin (Rom 3:10, 23; 6:23; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:2).²² Paul recognized that unbelievers are responsible for their sin even though they are blinded by Satan, captured to do his will, and enslaved by the demonic.

impact on paul's missionary work

Paul's understanding of the state of non-believers had a significant impact on his work as a missionary. He faced considerable opposition in his work. He was run out of numerous cities (Acts 13:50; 14:5–6; 17:10, 14). He was imprisoned (Acts 16:22–24; 21:33). He was beaten multiple times and once stoned until thought dead (Acts 14:19–23; 16:22–23; 21:31). Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29 some of the opposition he faced:

102

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Despite the dangers Paul faced from his opponents, he was gracious and compassionate in the midst of their threats. Paul's grace toward them no doubt extended from Paul's understanding of the very character of God, but his grace was motivated by the fact that he knew his opponents were fallen men under the spell of the Enemy. When the people of Lystra misunderstood a miracle and attempted to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, Paul did not conclude that the people were insane and undeserving of the gospel; rather, he tore his clothes and pleaded with the people to turn from idolatry to Christ.

Later in Lystra these same crowds stoned Paul until they thought he was dead (Acts 14:19). Paul, however, did not respond with anger, nor did he determine ministry to these people to be a waste of time. Instead, he recognized that they

²² Page, *Powers of Evil*, 186.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's were opposed to the work of the gospel precisely because as unbelievers they were members of Satan's kingdom. Paul re-entered the city and continued to preach the gospel in the surrounding area.

Second Timothy 2:25–26 also shows Paul's grace toward those captive to do the Devil's will. Here Paul encouraged Timothy to approach his opponents with gentleness so that they may repent and turn to Christ, escaping “the snare of the devil.” Even though his opponents attacked him and sought to destroy the churches he planted, Paul responded with love toward them because he understood them as belonging to Satan. Since unbelievers are blinded to the glorious truths of the gospel, Paul was motivated in his missionary work by love, grace, mercy, and compassion for them.

Ultimately, Paul's missionary endeavors display his willingness to suffer so that those belonging to the kingdom of Satan might hear the gospel and believe in it. He found strength during times of imprisonment because his being in prison enabled him to share the gospel with prisoners and prison guards (Phil 1:12). He spoke of suffering as a means of displaying Christ's worth (Col 1:24; 2 Cor 12:9–10) and as necessary for those committed to Christ (Acts 14:22). Paul loved the lost—those captured by Satan—to such an extent that he was willing to endure the harshest treatments of men to give them an opportunity to hear the gospel.

103

paul's understanding of satan's attacks on believers

Whereas unbelievers belong to Satan, believers have been saved out of Satan's domain and belong to Christ (Col 1:13; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:7). Since Satan is already in control of unbelievers, the primary nature of the spiritual conflict seen in Paul's letters is related to Satan's attacks on believers. Paul's letters, in fact, refer more frequently to Satan's attacks on believers than to his control of unbelievers.²³ Satan's attacks on believers occur in two primary areas: destroying the witness of believers and destroying the theology of churches.

satan attacks believers by destroying their witness

In the most well-known passage on spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul encouraged believers to put on the armor of God so that they “may be able to stand against the devil's schemes” (Eph 6:11). Although the Devil uses a variety of methods in his attacks of believers, Paul's letters display such techniques as tempting them to sin, attacking their livelihood, gaining a foothold over them, and distracting them.

²³ Page, *Powers of Evil*, 186; Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 120.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8
Tempting Believers to Sin.

One of Satan's principal techniques is to destroy the witness of believers by tempting them to sin.²⁴ Satan's work in tempting believers to sin is seen in 1 Timothy 3:6. In this passage, Paul gives Timothy instructions concerning the qualifications for elders. One of the qualifications is that the candidate should not be a new believer, "or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." In the same way that the Devil fell into the trap of pride (Isa 14:12–21; Eze 28:12–19),²⁵ he entices believers (and especially those in leadership positions) to become arrogant.²⁶

Paul clarified the connection between Satan and temptation to sin in 1 Corinthians 7:5. A group in Corinth was claiming that for married couples, spiritual priorities took precedence over marital intimacy.²⁷ Paul's response to this issue shows that "prayer and sexual relations are not mutually exclusive,"²⁸ and that complete abstinence within marriage is incredibly difficult and unwise.²⁹ Paul encouraged the believers to abstain from sexual relations only for a time and then to come together again, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Even though a spiritual purpose existed behind believers' abstinence, Satan would still use abstinence as a means of tempting them into some sexual sin.

First Thessalonians 3:5 addresses Satan's tempting activity. In this passage, Paul refers to Satan as "the tempter." Paul used this term to describe Satan because he knew that Satan often leads people away from God.³⁰ In fact, tempting people to sin and leading them away from God are the fundamental components of Satan's plan. He is always at work to set traps for believers that they might turn away from following after God.³¹

The temptation that Paul wrote of in 1 Thessalonians 3:5 is the temptation of turning away from the faith.³² Paul knew that he was not able to spend a long period of time with these believers (Acts 17:10), and he knew that they were

²⁴ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 27.

²⁵ Many scholars reject the notion that Isaiah 14:12–21 and Ezekiel 28:12–19 have the fall of Satan in view because they are actually prophecies against the kings of Babylon and Tyre. It is much more likely, though, that Isaiah and Ezekiel are using the imagery of Satan's fall to explain what will happen to these two powerful kings.

²⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 180; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin Jr., *1, 2 Timothy Titus*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 113.

²⁷ Anthony C. Thieselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 507.

²⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 262.

²⁹ Page, *Powers of Evil*, 189.

³⁰ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 164.

³¹ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 33 (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 104.

³² I do not mean that Paul advocates that believers can lose their salvation. Once someone is genuinely converted, they cannot lose their salvation. The evidence, though, that someone is genuinely converted is perseverance. If one perseveres, then their conversion was genuine, but if they turn away from the faith, then they were not genuinely converted. What Paul's statement in this passage means is that he feared this group had given up on the faith, and thus,

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's struggling without the full instruction of the Word. He also knew that Satan would attack them by tempting them to turn away from God and to sin, and Paul feared that they had given in to these temptations.³³ He recognized that Satan will use any means necessary to tempt believers to sin, be it a new position of power, a fast for spiritual purposes, or the lack of spiritual nourishment.

Attacking Believers' Livelihood. While Satan often tempts believers into sin, he also attacks their livelihood. The clearest example of this method of Satan is 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, where Paul describes “a messenger of Satan” that was sent to harass him. Paul used the words *sko,loy th| sarki*, (thorn in the flesh) to describe this messenger. The word *sko,loy* is used to signify something sharp and pointed, and it denotes “something which frustrates and causes trouble in the lives of those afflicted.”³⁴ While it is impossible to know exactly what the thorn was, it was most likely a physical ailment.³⁵

Whatever the thorn was, it is clear from Paul's language that it caused him a great deal of pain. Schreiner notes that presumably Satan intended the thorn “to inflict misery on [Paul] and cause him to doubt God's goodness.”³⁶ It is likely that Satan was using the pain to hinder Paul and limit his ability to preach the gospel.³⁷

This painful attack, however, was not the result of any sinful behavior on Paul's part.³⁸ Sometimes God allows Satan to attack believers for reasons that are unknown. Amazingly, this passage teaches that God is sovereign over these attacks, and He uses them for the growth of the believer and the advance of the gospel.

While Satan was using the thorn to attack Paul and humiliate him through severe weakness, God used the attack for good.³⁹ Paul wrote that God has used the thorn to keep him from becoming conceited (12:7). He then wrote that the weakness he felt because of the thorn caused him to depend more on God's power and less on his own. In the end, the suffering that Paul experienced served to spread the gospel.⁴⁰

Gaining a Foothold over Believers. In addition to tempting believers and attacking their livelihood, Satan seeks to gain a foothold over them. Paul gave a

their lack of perseverance indicates that they had not been genuinely converted. For a study on this issue, see Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001).

³³ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 165; Martin, 1, 2 *Thessalonians*, 104.

³⁴ Colin G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Canon Leon Morris, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 205; Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 855.

³⁵ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859.

³⁶ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 301.

³⁷ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, ed. James Luther Mays, *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 119.

³⁸ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 125.

³⁹ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856–57; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 197.

⁴⁰ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 102.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8 series of gospel-related commands in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. After commanding the believers not to let their anger lead them into sin, Paul wrote, “And give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:27). The word translated “opportunity” is *to,pon*, connoting an inhabitable space.⁴¹ The devil seeks to use sin in the life of a believer to gain an area of influence over him.

The Devil works in conjunction with the flesh to attack the believer.⁴² In this case, sin does not result from an attack of Satan, but from the believer himself.⁴³ The believer experiences righteous anger toward some issue or person, then holds on to that anger until it results in a sinful anger. It is at this point that the Devil seizes the opportunity and attacks the believer. Sinful behavior in the life of a believer opens the door for further demonic attack.⁴⁴

Distracting Believers. While Satan uses sin to gain a foothold over a believer, he also distracts believers with the things of this world. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:1–3 that the world, the flesh, and the Enemy work in concert with one another.⁴⁵ Satan uses the flesh to tempt believers to sin, and he also uses things like money, possessions, sinful aspects of culture, or peer pressure to consume believers and distract them, taking their focus off God and his work. Satan cleverly uses this tactic knowing that if believers are consumed with the temporal, they will have no time for the eternal.⁴⁶

Paul knew that Satan would use materialism and worldly concerns to distract believers, so he continually encouraged them to focus on God. Colossians 3:2 is one example of this type of encouragement: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” In the context of the letter, Paul’s admonition is set in sharp contrast to the outward religious regulations Paul’s opponents claimed were necessary for salvation (2:16–23).⁴⁷ To focus on the things of the world, for religious reasons or not, is to succumb to an attack of the Enemy.

The Galatian heresy is another example of believers falling prey to Satan’s tactic of encouraging the elevation of the things of this world above the things of God in religious practice.⁴⁸ Paul’s opponents were telling the Galatians that they needed to add circumcision and other rituals of the Mosaic Law to their faith in

⁴¹ Richard Dean Love, “Pauline Contextualization at Ephesus: Power and Leadership Issues with Special Reference to Sudanese Folk Muslims” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998), 105; Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 82.

⁴² Love, “Pauline Contextualization at Ephesus,” 104–05.

⁴³ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 341.

⁴⁴ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34–36.

⁴⁶ Chuck Lawless, *Disciplined Warriors: Growing Healthy Churches That Are Equipped for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 68–69.

⁴⁷ Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 131.

⁴⁸ George, *Galatians*, 313.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's Christ (Gal 4:8–11). This attack was demonic in nature as Satan empowered the false teachers as they sought to persuade the Galatian believers away from the things of God and toward the things of this world.

satan attacks churches by destroying their theology

A second way that Satan attacks believers is to attack churches by destroying their theology. If Satan can chip away at the theological foundation of the church so that the believers no longer focus on Christ, Satan will win a great victory against multiple believers.⁴⁹ In contrast to attacking individuals, by attacking churches, Satan is able to affect numerous believers at a single time.

This objective of Satan is so common that nearly all of Paul's letters address some heretical teaching that threatens the theological foundation of the church.⁵⁰ In Galatia, the believers were adding to Christ by requiring circumcision and other elements of the Mosaic Law as necessary for salvation (Gal 1:6–7; 3:1–6; 5:2–9; 6:12–15). In Thessalonica, the believers were focusing on eschatological issues and not living in accordance with the gospel (1 Thess 4:13–18; 5:1–1; 2 Thess 2:2–5). In Corinth, the church was falling into disunity by celebrating various Christian leaders (1 Cor 1:12). They were also permitting sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1–13) and were engaged in lawsuits among members (1 Cor 6:1–11). In Ephesus and Colossae, believers were giving too much attention to spiritual powers (Eph 1:21; 3:10; Col 1:16–17; 2:8–10, 16–23).

107

Attacking Leaders. One of Satan's methods is to attack the theological foundation of churches by targeting leaders. Since positions of leadership are so vitally connected to the theological integrity of the church, Satan can affect the entire church body by attacking its leaders. Paul recognized this threat and sought to equip leaders to stand against these attacks.

In 1 Timothy 3:6–7 Paul instructed Timothy on the selection of leaders by reminding him that leaders should be able to withstand the attacks of the Enemy. Verse six shows that the first attack that leaders face is the threat of pride. Paul encouraged Timothy not to install recent converts to leadership positions because they are especially prone to this temptation.⁵¹ When leaders become spiritually proud because of their elevated position, they take their eyes off Christ and begin to minister in their own power. Satan is successful any time a leader stops depending on Christ and begins to depend on himself.

⁴⁹ Lawless, *Disciplined Warriors*, 28–38.

⁵⁰ Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 419, 444, 480, 588, 610.

⁵¹ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 180.

Verse seven shows that a second method of the Enemy is to disgrace leaders among those outside of the church. This verse states that disgrace among outsiders is “a snare of the devil.” If a church’s leader sins in a public way so that his reputation is tarnished among the surrounding community, the church’s reputation is also disgraced. In this situation, the church’s overall effectiveness to share the gospel with its community is hindered.

Outwitting Congregations. Another method through which Satan attempts to destroy a church’s theology is by outwitting the congregation. Paul’s words concerning this method are seen in 2 Corinthians 2:11; however, to understand this verse, one must go back to 1 Corinthians 5:5. A church member is boasting about his sexually immoral lifestyle, so Paul commanded the church to “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” The man was to be placed outside the fellowship of believers and into the realm of Satan, who will serve “in some way as God’s agent for punishment.”⁵² Paul’s hope for the man was that his excommunication would lead him to repentance.

108

Second Corinthians 2:5–11 then makes clear that the church had obeyed Paul’s command and the man repented, but the church had not restored the brother to fellowship. At this point Paul wrote that the church should “forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2:7). The church was to forgive and restore to fellowship the brother they had handed over to Satan.

Paul then wrote that if the church failed to forgive a repentant brother, it too would have fall into one of Satan’s traps. Garland notes that this passage reveals “how important it is for the Christian community to balance the exercise of firm discipline with compassionate charity toward those who repent. Failure to do either plays into the hands of Satan.”⁵³ To forgive the repentant brother would frustrate Satan’s designs and not allow him to outwit the congregation.⁵⁴

Empowering False Teachers. A third method used by Satan to destroy the theology of church is to empower false teachers. Several passages indicate that Paul understood false teachers as vessels of Satan. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:14–15 that he was not surprised at the tactic used by false teachers because it is the same tactic that Satan often uses. They have disguised themselves as bringers of truth, just as Satan often disguises himself as an angel of light. Paul then explained that these false teachers were servants of Satan, the chief opponent of all church ministry.⁵⁵

⁵² Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 169; Canon Leon Morris, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Canon Leon Morris, 2nd ed. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

⁵³ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 131.

⁵⁴ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 233.

⁵⁵ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 775; Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 190.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's

Three times in his letters to Timothy Paul revealed that the false teachers are empowered by Satan. He wrote that “some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teaching of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences have been seared” (1 Tim 4:1–2). The means by which some in the church community would devote themselves to the teaching of demons is through the witness of the false teachers. The source of the heretical teachings is of a demonic origin.⁵⁶

Paul stated that some in the church “have already strayed after Satan” (1 Tim 5:15). The means by which they have gone after Satan is through their acceptance of the demonically inspired heresy.⁵⁷

One final passage from Paul's letters to Timothy in which he revealed his understanding of false teachers as empowered by Satan is 2 Timothy 2:25–26. Paul encouraged Timothy to correct the opponents gently in the hope that they may repent and turn to Christ. By turning to Christ, the opponents would “escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” These false teachers had been captured by the devil and were accomplishing his will in the church by promoting heresy.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Paul held out hope that they might eventually repent and turn to Christ.

Paul also conveyed this understanding in Colossians. Paul wrote, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world” (Col 2:8). While the teaching can be explained on a human level (“according to human tradition”), Paul recognized that the true origin of the teaching is demonic, which he referred to as “the elemental spirits of the world.”⁵⁹ This verse and Colossians 2:18–19 indicate that Paul understood that Satan was using the false teaching to take believers captive.

impact on paul's missionary work

Paul's understanding of Satan's attacks on believers affected his work as a missionary in several ways. Paul knew that Satan would attack believers by destroying their witness and that he would attack churches by destroying their theology, so he focused his mission strategy on the planting of churches that were disciplined and prepared for battle.⁶⁰ In his method, Paul did not stop at evangelism

⁵⁶ Lea and Griffin Jr., 1, 2 *Timothy Titus*, 129; Love, “Pauline Contextualization at Ephesus,” 131; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 243; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 228.

⁵⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 297.

⁵⁸ Lea and Griffin Jr., 1, 2 *Timothy Titus*, 221; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 537.

⁵⁹ Arnold, 3 *Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 95–96.

⁶⁰ Lawless, *Disciplined Warriors*; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 231–48.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8 alone, but he made sure that those who came to faith in Christ were gathered together into communities of Christ followers called churches.⁶¹

Paul planted churches because he was certain that believers could not stand against the Devil's schemes alone. He knew that believers would find encouragement and accountability within the church. He also knew that with the right leadership in place, believers would be taught the Word and trained how to stand against the Devil's schemes. He knew that it was only within a church that a believer would grow into a mature relationship with Christ (Col 1:28) and be able to put on the full armor of God (Eph 6:10–20).⁶²

110

Since Paul was aware that the Enemy would attack the churches he planted, Paul helped the churches in developing their theological foundation. While some contemporary missionaries are attempting to hasten Jesus' return by doing their work and moving on as quickly as possible,⁶³ the biblical data shows that Paul was concerned for the theological integrity of the churches he planted. He never stopped being concerned for the churches (2 Cor 11:28). In his missionary travels, he frequently returned to these churches in order to continue teaching and training the believers (Acts 14:24–28; 15:41; 16:1–5; 20:1–38). Moreover, one of the reasons Paul's letters exist is because he knew the Enemy would attack the theological foundation of his churches, and the effectiveness of his missionary work was directly tied to the churches maintaining theological integrity (1 Thess 2:19–20).

New Testament Scholar Eckhard Schnabel gives four areas of Paul's teaching among his churches.⁶⁴ The first is theological instruction, in which Paul taught the basic truths of the Christian faith to these new believers. In the second area, ethical instruction, Paul taught about the kind of moral behavior that is in accordance with the gospel. The third area is instruction concerning the life of the church, in which Paul taught the new believers concerning Christian religious forms. In the final area, evangelistic witness, Paul taught the new believers to share their faith.

Paul had a warfare mentality. He knew that Satan would unleash a full frontal assault against believers since they were no longer his captives. Paul planted churches because he knew believers would be disciplined there, and he helped those churches develop their theological foundation so they would stand firm in the day of battle.

⁶¹ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 231–32.

⁶² Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 53.

⁶³ For an explanation of this view, see M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 121–126; David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Mission Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 279–314; A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 132.

⁶⁴ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 236–48.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's application to contemporary missions

There are several ways that this study applies to contemporary missions. First, recognizing the state of the lost as men and women who are blinded to the truths of the gospel, missionaries must be faithful to pray for their people. In our day of increasing global interaction, growing urban development, and consistent technological breakthroughs, missionaries can often be tempted to rely on themselves to accomplish the work of the kingdom. A similar danger is the development of “prayer” strategies that have more to do with what man can accomplish than what God can accomplish.

Paul recognized that a lost person was spiritually dead (Eph 2:1), and in his work he prayed that God would make them “alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5) through his preaching of the gospel message. Missionaries today must withstand the temptation to work in their own power, and they must look to God in prayer to do the work that no man is able to do—enliven a man's heart.

111

Missionaries must likewise develop strategies for involving others in praying for their people. Knowing that the Enemy held many captive, Paul asked the believers in Ephesus to pray for him concerning the gospel, that he might “declare it boldly” (Eph 6:20). Missionaries must avoid developing prayer strategies in which they seek to confront the spiritual powers over a city, but they must develop strategies that involve people in praying for the bold proclamation of the gospel.

Second, recognizing that the lost are blind to the glorious truths of the gospel and enslaved by the Enemy, missionaries must have compassion for those to whom they minister. Dealing with cultural differences can be frustrating, and it is one reason why missionaries often serve as the heroes of the Christian community. Unfortunately, when I served on the field, the discomfort I felt from living amidst unfamiliar cultural norms sometimes led me and other coworkers to feel superior to the people we were serving. As God's ambassadors, though, missionaries must embrace the discomfort of being in a strange land among a people they do not understand, and must serve with humility and compassion those who are headed toward a Christ-less eternity.

Third, missionaries must continue to wrestle with the often “excluded middle.”⁶⁵ Since most of the unreached world is animistic in their belief system,⁶⁶ missionaries need to consider the best ways to communicate the gospel to people for whom the spirit world is active. Thankfully, Paul wrote some of his letters to people who had a similar worldview. Contemporary missionaries should proclaim,

⁶⁵ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 189–201.

⁶⁶ Gailyn Van Rhee, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1991), 25.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 8
as Paul did to the church in Colossae, that in Christ we need not fear the demonic forces of this world (Col 1:13, 16–17; 2:10, 16–23). Though Satan and his forces of evil are powerful enemies, Christ is the victorious warrior king who has triumphed over man’s ancient foe. The beauty of the gospel is the beauty of a bloodied king, slain for sinners, and is now highly exalted, far above every name that is named (Phil 2:9). Missionaries must confront the fear-laden beliefs of the middle realm with the peace-inspiring truth of the risen king Jesus.

Fourth, knowing that Satan will attack the work of the kingdom, missionaries must seek to develop deep relationships with others in which they are held accountable to faithful service. The temptations of this world are many, and in a sense, the Enemy places a target on the back of missionaries as they seek to win the lost to Christ. Great danger exists in missionaries being so isolated geographically that no one else knows the state of their walk with Christ. They should utilize advances in communication technology to interact with others who can hold them accountable to spiritual fidelity. Deep relationships are a great defense against the attacks of the Enemy.

112

Fifth, being assured that Satan will attack those led to Christ, missionaries must disciple new believers to withstand the attacks of the Enemy. Like Paul, missionaries should be convinced that Satan will seek to destroy the witness of those they lead to Christ. As a result, they need to make long-term investments to disciple their converts. David Sills has noted that one of the most ominous developments in modern missions methodology is the “need for speed” that emphasizes conversion and lacks discipleship. “When we permit the need for speed or clever missiological strategies to reduce the Great Commission to simply ‘going and reaching and leaving,’ we fail to obey the words of Christ in His last command to His church.”⁶⁷ Faithfulness to the Great Commission does not mean reaching and leaving, but it means reaching and discipling so that new believers can withstand the attacks of the Enemy.

Sixth, knowing that Satan will attack the theological foundations of the churches that are planted, missionaries must be faithful to teach and train leaders proper methods of biblical interpretation. Once a new church is planted, the new believers need to learn to look to Scripture to answer the pressing needs of their context. Paul Hiebert recognized this need and referred to it as the fourth self, self-theologizing.⁶⁸ Before believers are able to self-theologize, though, they need the missionary’s help in learning to read Scripture the correct way—reading to understand what the original authors meant when they wrote. Only with the

⁶⁷ Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 120.

⁶⁸ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193–224.

Brooks: Pauline Spiritual Warfare: How a Warfare Mentality Shaped Paul's proper theological foundation will they be able to withstand the threats of cults and false teachers.

Paul's warfare mentality shaped his understanding of his approach to missions. Paul's letters display the most well-developed understanding of Satan and demonic forces in the New Testament. Paul's focus, however, was not on Satan but on Christ. He knew that Satan was a defeated enemy who would be destroyed. He knew that unbelievers belonged to Satan, and he engaged in evangelism in order to bring them out of darkness and into the glorious light of the gospel of Christ. He knew that Satan would attack believers and the churches he planted, and as a result, he disciplined them and prepared them to stand firm and to share the gospel boldly.

Though the threats of the Enemy are real, there is nothing the Enemy can do to affect the believer's standing in Christ. Since a believer's place before God is secure, let him boldly do whatever he can to take the message of his risen Lord to those who have never heard. Paul would heartily agree with the final words of Luther's hymn, "Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also; The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."⁶⁹

113

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⁶⁹ Luther, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," 8.