The Spiritual Powers of Ephesians 6:10–18 in the Light of African Pentecostal Spirituality

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Ephesians 6:10–18 remains one of the most important passages in the Pauline corpus that deals with the issue of spiritual warfare. Yet the referents of the spiritual powers remain somewhat unclear due to the differences in the continental world views of various interpreters. This article, in addition to reviewing some current hermeneutical approaches, suggests there is a shared understanding of the African Pentecostal world view of spirits with that of Eph 6:10–18. It cautions against an uncritical application of Paul’s teaching.

Key Words: spirituality, mythologization, inculturation, supernatural

It has been suggested that “in order to validate its claim to universal validity, the biblical text is dependent on the appropriation of readers with different orientations in different contexts.”¹ This suggestion is right. It is akin to what Ukpong describes as “inculturation biblical hermeneutic,” an approach by which interpreters consciously and explicitly seek to interpret the biblical text from sociocultural perspectives of different people.² This article is an attempt to do just that.

Without much hesitation, one could say that Eph 6:10–18 is perhaps the clearest and most detailed description in the NT of the nature of the spiritual warfare that believers face. It does not assume but pointedly asserts that the people of God are engaged in a spiritual warfare. But its interpretation, particularly the identity of the enemy and the nature of the warfare, is less than clear due to cultural influences. This article is one among many in this trajectory. It demonstrates how the reading of Eph 6:10–18 in an African Pentecostal sociocultural and spiritual context³ not

3. As noted by Daniel Darko in his response to the presentation of this essay at the IBR sessions in San Francisco, November 19, 2011, much of what is presented here as an African view of the spirit world has parallels to the Greco-Roman milieu of the NT world.
only enhances understanding of the text but also compliments its scholarly interpretation. It consists of a brief review of some of the hermeneutical approaches to understanding the nature of spiritual warfare in Eph 6:10–18 and proffers an alternative reading approach that derives from my African and Pentecostal background. In highlighting my background, I seek to show the distinction between Pentecostalism in the northern and southern hemispheres, particularly in Africa. In other words, I attempt to show a few significant differences between African and North American spirituality.

AN AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY

Because of the transnational character of the Pentecostal spirituality and the heterogeneity of Africa, questions can be raised about the propriety of speaking about African Pentecostal Spirituality. As such, it must be noted that African Pentecostal spirituality is anything but monolithic. But there remains a family resemblance among the various strands. One must also recognize its indebtedness and connection to North American Pentecostalism. But while this spirituality is seemingly peripheral in the West in general and North American life in particular, it offers the dominant conceptual framework in Africa. As Asamoa-Gyadu rightly observes, for African Christians in general, categories of power, dominion, and alleviation of suffering by the power of the Holy Spirit are of utmost importance and relevance in the general struggle with fears and insecurities within a universe in which supernatural powers are considered hyperactive.

An important and major difference between the North American/Western Pentecostalism and that of Africa is in the area of the work of the Holy Spirit and deliverance from demons. Although the Holy Spirit may have been marginalized in Western theology, it is evident that the presence and activities of the Holy Spirit in and through the community of believers are at the center of African Pentecostal spirituality. In Africa,

4. See Rijk A. van Dijk, “From Camp to Encompassment: Discourses of Transsubjectivity in the Ghanaian Pentecostal,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27 (1997) 135–59, esp. p. 142. He writes, “Pentecostalism is historically a transnational phenomenon, which in its modern forms is reproduced in its local diversity through a highly accelerated circulation of goods, ideas and people. The new charismatic type of Pentecostalism creates a moral and physical geography whose domain is one of transnational cultural inter-penetration and flow.”


rediscovery of the Spirit came at a point of deep crisis and turmoil in its history. Nigeria is a case in point. Pentecostal spirituality flourished at a time of socioeconomic disintegration and political instability in the late 70s early 80s. It was widely embraced because it offers the resources for dealing with this despair and undertaking the structural adjustment program necessary for the continual search for greater harmony and prosperity for all.

Western critiques of the Pentecostal phenomenon and deliverance from demons quite often fail to take into account the African view of the spirit world. The belief in the existence of other spiritual beings besides God is widespread. In traditional African belief, spirits are ubiquitous: every area of the earth not only has a spirit of its own but also is capable of being inhabited by a spirit. The African universe “is a spiritual universe, one in which supernatural beings play significant roles in the thought and action of the people.” The traditional African lives in an intentional world in which things do not happen by chance. Even when the problems are naturally caused, evil spirits are able to set in quickly and exploit the situation to the disadvantage of the victim. The general belief is that events have causes. Unfortunately, as Ferdinando has rightly noted, the approach of Western scholarship to issues related to “spirit beliefs” in Africa is “dominated by anti-supernaturalistic rationalism” in which “spirits have no place except as constructions of the human mind.” Experiences of demon possession are explained away as either psychological or psychiatric conditions, thus seeing them in terms of mental pathology. Asamoa’s castigation of Western missionaries for their casual and rather dismissive attitude of the effects of evil spirits among Africans societies is on target. He writes, “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.”

Pentecostal spirituality is very much at home in Africa because its interpretation of and responses to evil are continuous with traditional religious ideas in which evil is believed and understood to owe its presence to spiritual causes. It is a world view in which there is no dichotomy between belief and experience: they always belong together. As a Pentecostal minister, I can say that the ministries of exorcism, healing, and deliverance have been important tools of evangelization wherever Pentecostalism has emerged and thrived. In these contexts, believers see the existential

meaning of Christ’s ministry in their lives. Clinton Arnold’s description of the rhetorical setting of Ephesians in Asia minor is, without doubt, largely applicable to many similar situations in present-day Africa. He writes, 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 common fear of the demonic powers.

**Hermeneutical Approaches to Ephesians 6:10–18**

The hermeneutical approaches are varied. Rudolf Bultmann’s quest for the demythologization of the NT is well known and, as such, does not need to be rehashed here. However, its continued relevance for the understanding of the evil powers in Eph 6:10–18 is important. For Bultmann, supernatural powers, unlike what obtains in the African world view, do not have the ability to interrupt the natural realms of cause and effect. As such, he comes to the conclusion that the biblical language on the spirit world is nothing but a mere objectification of the transcendent into the immanent. The Holy Spirit is not an expression for a personal being but rather a way of describing “authentic Christian living.” To Bultmann, living “according to the Spirit” does not refer to any supernatural influence. Rather, it describes “a genuine human life” that lives out “of what is invisible and non-disposable and, therefore, surrenders all self-contrived security.” For someone to accept a contrary view is not to have “grasped the hiddenness and transcendence of divine action and . . . seek God’s action the sphere of what is worldly.” Bultmann does not appear to be alone, and his view is somewhat reflective of people in the western hemisphere who downplay the existence of real evil forces that wreak havoc in the world. For example, Markus Barth argues that the evil forces refer to “the world of axioms and principles of politics and religion, of economics and society, of morals and biology, of history and culture.” In his recent work, Timothy Gombis follows this line of reasoning. Having dismissed the point of the passage as either addressing the issue of the victorious Christian life or what he describes as the “frighteningly speculative engagements with demonic forces,” he writes that “the enemy of the church is not the world or

the people in the world but the powers” and that “our warfare involves resisting the corrupting influences of the powers” in a subversive manner.\textsuperscript{18}

Other scholars have taken the opposite view of the demythologization of evil powers that is espoused by Bultmann. Instead, they argue for the reality of spiritual forces in some form or another. On the one hand, Wesley Carr argues that the spiritual powers in Eph 6:12 are not demonic, evil, or malicious. Instead, Carr argues, the powers refer to angelic powers.\textsuperscript{19} Carr’s view has been rightly challenged both for lack of evidence and methodological inconsistencies.\textsuperscript{20} On the other hand, Walter Wink maintains that the evil powers in Eph 6:12 refer to “the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power . . . the spirituality of institutions.”\textsuperscript{21} Wink also denies the existence of a personal being called the devil, insisting that it is a “collective symbolization of evil” and “the collective of the weight of human fallenness.”\textsuperscript{22} Whatever Wink cannot categorize materially, he labels as superstitious.\textsuperscript{23} As rightly observed and succinctly stated by Asumang,

Where Wink erred was to deny any particular influence of personal spirits in implementing the stratagems of the evil powers. In so doing, not only is the teaching in Ephesians undermined, the negative effects of increased spiritism, witchcraft and occultism in some societies are ignored. Consequently, Wink more-or-less creates a new myth of the existence of impersonal spirits whose effects are corporate and not personal. He commits a not infrequent mistake of the Cartesian enlightenment philosophy that regards any other world view as “primitive and unscientific.”\textsuperscript{24}

In contrast to the preceding views, Arnold is certainly correct in asserting that, “Paul never showed any sign of doubt regarding the real existence of the principalities and powers. He saw them as angelic beings belonging to Satan’s kingdom. Their aim is to lead humanity away from God through
direct influence on individuals as well as through wielding control over
the world religions and various other structures of our existence.”
He also cautions us against the tendency to forget Paul’s sociocultural context.

Paul was a man of his times. He believed in the personal character of
the powers of evil in the universe. The idea here is much the same as in
2 Cor 10:3–4: for though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to
the flesh. It is completely irrelevant if the particular opponent we face is
a principality, a power, or a ruler of the darkness of this age. Collectively,
they are all members of spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.
They are all part of a spiritual army that is organized and established in
ranks—and under the headship of Satan, the devil, who comes against us
with his wiles. In Eph 6:12, Paul brings together three of the four words
for power previously used in 1:19 and 3:16–21. The Ephesians would have
understood the implications. The same power that raised Jesus from the
death (1:20) and brought them to life when they were dead in trespasses
and sins (2:1) is now available to them. There can be no doubt about its
adequacy. Believers are to clothe themselves with the armor that only God
provides. It is a complete outfit because the soldier must be fully protected.
Paul does not call the believer to enter into spiritual warfare. He simply
announces it as a fact. The fact that our real battle is not against flesh and
blood is lost on many Christians, who put all their efforts in that direction.

Ephesians 6:10–18 in
African Pentecostal Hermeneutics

Healing and exorcism take place in the context of what Pentecostals de-
scribe as spiritual warfare. This is based on Paul’s submission, “For our
struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, the authori-
ties, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces
of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). As noted by Kwesi Dickson and
Paul Ellingworth, “for the African, the world of spirits is a real world . . . . It
is the spiritual beings which actually control the world; indeed the world is
a spiritual arena in which the various categories of spiritual beings display
their powers. Man [humanity], in particular, is entirely dependent upon
these spiritual beings.” Thus, it is understood that a person who mani-

fests a certain behavior is under the control or has been taken possession
of by an invisible being or power.

26. In most cases the reading/hearing of Eph 6:10–20 always focuses on exorcism as this essay does. However, I recognize the fact that the world of the Ephesians to whom the letter
was addressed as well as that of Africans was one that was obsessed with mystical and spiritual
power that sought to understand, control, and benefit from or defend against it in one’s daily
life and in the welfare of the community. In other words, the meaning of Eph 6:10–20 must be
understood as broader than exorcism. It demands, as Daniel Darko suggests, that the reader
must understand ethics as imperative in spiritual warfare.
Among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, Satan is known as Esu. He is known to be the trickster deity and is regarded as a divinity of mischief who can make things difficult for humans and divinities. He is malicious and a mischief maker, quite capable of causing confusion, bringing about complicated situations or promoting malice among people. As Bolaji Idowu observes, “There is an unmistakable element of evil in Esu and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with things evil.” It is quite clear still that Yoruba put almost every evil tendency and practice among human beings down to his agency. He continues, “from all accounts he is not only a bewilderingly versatile character but also extremely capricious. He is an elusive, slippery character whom it is not easy to fix.” The preponderance of evil associated with Esu leads Idowu to equate him with either the devil or Satan. When a person behaves in a wicked way he or she may be referred to as “omo esu” that is, a child of the devil or could be said as being used of the devil. The Yoruba themselves avoid having any dealings with Esu. Instead they offer sacrifices to avoid or elude his wickedness, callousness and devilish atrocious plans, believing that victory is possible. This view ultimately informs African Pentecostal spirituality that situates the possibility of victory in the sacrifice of Christ. One always hears such songs as:

I have seen, seen the downfall of Satan  
Glory be to God, Glory be to Jesus  
I have seen, seen, seen the downfall of Satan,  
Glory be to God. Amen.

I have seen, seen, the victory of Jesus,  
Glory be to God, Glory be to Jesus,  
I have seen, seen, the victory of Jesus  
Glory be to God Amen

To use Matthews Ojo’s language, Pentecostals have “appropriated their traditional cultural backgrounds,” and in doing so they have defined salvation in a holistic sense that includes healing and deliverance from demonic attacks and oppressions. As such, Eph 6:11–20 may have unwittingly become an integral part of the African Pentecostal’s tenet of faith.

Apart from Satan, the Yoruba have strong belief in mysterious powers, which are called various names such as oogun, egbogi, or isegun (magic, medicine), oso, oogun ika, or oogun buburu (sorcery, bad magic) and aje, eye, oso (witchcraft). Sorcery is the use of bad or evil magic to kill or harm people, or to cause misfortune to people or the society. This use can be out of spite or to avenge a wrong done. Some types of sorcery include abilu (evil magic that brings a drastic change in the fortune of a person), apeta

29. Ibid.  
30. Ibid., 85.  
(invocation), *efun* (evil magic that makes a person behave abnormally), and *isasi* (evil magic that makes a person act as one who is insane). Both sorcery and witchcraft are regarded as a reality among the Yoruba. They are usually regarded as forces of evil and used as explanations of social tensions and misfortunes in the society. If one is caught being a witch or wizard within the society, the spirit must be exorcised from the person in order to avoid endangering the life of the individual or the community. One should not therefore wonder why passages such as Eph 6:10–18 and 2 Cor 10:4 are some of the texts often quoted by African Pentecostals. When Paul speaks about wrestling with “principalities and powers” or having an “agent of Satan” in his body, he speaks in categories and idioms that are at home with African cosmological ideas. It is not surprising that Pentecostal preachers in Africa, keenly aware of the African world view about spirits, have seized on that world view to espouse the doctrine and practice of deliverance from demons. Unfortunately, however, an unhealthy interest in spiritual forces has often led to an elaborate demonology with an overwhelming attention given to satanic forces in writings, ritual acts, and symbolic communication with satanic forces.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from this discussion that the biblical world view of spiritual causality within which African Pentecostal Spirituality finds its roots resonates strongly with African world views on cause and effect as they relate to evil in the world. As we have argued, even problems that may be considered natural can be taken advantage of by evil spirits for the purpose of exploiting them. So when Paul speaks about wrestling with “principalities and powers,” he speaks in a language that immediately resonates with an African, and even more so with an African Pentecostal. Nevertheless, one must be wary of the tendency by many Africans to “unduly elevate” evil powers and attribute everything to demons. With regards to the spiritual powers in Eph 6:10–18, one must take note of C. S. Lewis’s warning in his introduction to the *Screwtape Letters*. He writes, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.”

An unhealthy interest in demons unwittingly elevates the devil to a status beyond the biblical portrait. Worse still, if care is not taken, the way is made for a replacement of a belief in the supernatural with superstition. In this case, the result is nothing less than a systemization of evil powers in the world, something that is beyond what Paul intended to do. Moreover, a situation whereby human beings are reduced to pawns in the battle between good and evil spirits and for which their responsibility is only limited to prayer and deliverance is not biblical.