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John Frederick

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John Frederick

John Frederick (Ph.D) is Lecturer in New Testament and Greek at Trinity College Queensland in Australia. He is the author of Worship in the Way of the Cross (IVP, 2017) and The Ethics of the Enactment and Reception of Cruciform Love (Mohr Siebeck, 2019). John has planted and pastored churches in Phoenix and Boston, and he is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America.

Abstract: In Ephesians 6:10–20, the apostle Paul penned one of the most memorable accounts of spiritual warfare for Christians. Throughout the history of interpretation, the majority of exegetes have viewed Paul's account of the "armor of God" in relation to the spiritual struggle of individual Christians in their quests for growth in personal holiness. This article counteracts individualistic, moralistic, gnostic readings of Ephesians 6:10–20 by re-situating the "armor of God" metaphor within its original corporate/ecclesial, covenantal, and missional context in Ephesians. The article begins by redirecting evangelical thinking on social activism away from recent fundamentalist denunciations back to the original activist ethos of neo-evangelicalism. Next, Walter Wink's phenomenological reading of the Powers is explored as a framework for evangelical activism against human structures, systems, and ideologies that facilitate the activity of demonic and oppressive spiritual Powers. The article concludes by offering an exegetical recovery of the corporate, covenantal, and missional components of the armor of God metaphor thus providing a biblical and theological rationale and impetus for evangelical social action as the primary referent of spiritual warfare in Ephesians.

Key Words: spiritual warfare, demonology, the Powers, Ephesians, evangelical activism, social justice, Carl Henry, Walter Wink, Bultmann, neo-evangelical, covenant, missional, thoughts and prayers, faith and politics

Introduction

In Ephesians 6:10–20, the apostle Paul[1] penned one of the most memorable accounts of spiritual warfare for Christians. Throughout the history of interpretation, the

1. In this article I refer to the author as "Paul." The argument of the chapter does not rely on a particular theory of authorship, though I see no convincing reason to argue against Ephesians as a genuine Pauline epistle.

majority of exegetes have viewed Paul's account of the "armor of God" in relation to the spiritual struggle of individual Christians in their quests for growth in personal holiness. Many have insisted that the armor in this passage is meant to function in a solely (or primarily) defensive manner. The armor exists, in this reading, to assist Christians as they "stand firm" while fending off the attacks of the evil one on their personal salvation and progressive sanctification.

This individualistic exegesis has been coupled with a contemporary form of gnosticism in regard to the reality and activity of the Powers. Paul's insistence in Ephesians 6:12 that the battle of the church is not against "flesh and blood" but against the rulers, authorities, the cosmic powers, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, has been wrongly interpreted by many to suggest that the "spiritual" Powers operate in an entirely invisible manner, completely detached from any mediation through human structures, systems, or ideologies.

Consequently, a majority of Christians have inadvertently neglected, or outright removed the role of human structures, systems, and ideologies from the operation of the oppressive Powers, assuming that because the Powers exercise their influence from the "heavenly places," our response to them must take place apart from any material mediation. This individualistic, gnostic interpretation of Ephesians 6 and other parallel New Testament texts on the Powers, has led to an incomplete application of the biblical concept of spiritual warfare to an individual spiritual struggle that avoids the text's primary concern to articulate a corporate, covenantal, missional response to the Powers through and as the church, the body of Christ. This reading has, furthermore, jeopardized the ubiquitous and binding biblical mandate to pursue justice in the world as the covenant people of God. In contemporary times, this has caused some segments of American evangelicalism to become allergic to the church's historic commitment to the task of social justice, claiming as recently as 2018 that social activism is neither a sign of saving faith nor a central component to the mission of the church.[2]

In this chapter, I will counteract individualistic, moralistic, gnostic readings of Ephesians 6:10–20 by re-situating the "armor of God" metaphor within its original corporate/ecclesial, covenantal, and missional context in Ephesians. The chapter will proceed in three major movements. First, I will attempt to redirect evangelical thinking on social activism away from recent fundamentalist denunciations to the original neo-evangelical activist ethos characterized by Carl F. H. Henry and Harold John Ockenga. Second, I will offer Walter Wink's phenomenological reading of the Powers as a framework for evangelical activism against human structures, systems, and ideologies that facilitate the activity of demonic and oppressive spiritual Powers. Third, I will offer an exegetical recovery of the corporate, covenantal, and missional components of the armor of God metaphor thus providing a biblical and theological

2. Tom Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel," accessed January 7, 2020, https://statementonsocialjustice.com/.

rationale and impetus for evangelical social action as the primary referent of spiritual warfare in Ephesians.

Recovering the Roots of Evangelical Activism

When the term "evangelical activism" is used in the context of the current political, theological, and ecclesial climate in the United States, it evokes strong feelings of suspicion from a certain segment of American evangelicals. This can be observed in the recent document associated with John MacArthur and Tom Ascol entitled The Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel.[3] The document reveals a surprising distaste for evangelical involvement in the cause of social justice. The statement is, in this regard, more reminiscent of the separatist response of the fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s than of the neo-evangelicals who viewed both sound doctrine and social engagement as essential for faithful gospel ministry and witness in contemporary society. As George Marsden has shown, "The new evangelicalism [embraced] the full orthodoxy of fundamentalism in doctrine but [manifested] a social consciousness and responsibility which was strangely absent from fundamentalism."[4]

In contrast to the original neo-evangelical ethos, the Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel denies that "political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel" or that social activism should be "primary to the mission of the church."[5] The document explains that the "'obligation to live justly in the world" is one of the "implications and applications" of the gospel rather than a "definitional component" of the gospel.[6] The gospel is defined as:

> the divinely-revealed message concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ—especially his virgin birth, righteous life, substitutionary sacrifice, atoning death, and bodily resurrection—revealing who he is and what he has done with the promise that he will save anyone and everyone who turns from sin by trusting him as Lord.

Given the document's definition of the gospel, it is therefore internally consistent to refer to the activities of social justice as "implications and applications" rather than "definitional components" of the gospel. Yet, it is puzzling to then find that the drafters further deny that socially just acts are either "evidence of saving faith" or

3. Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice." Some of the initial signers include: John MacArthur, Voddie Baucham, Phil Johnson, and James White.

4. See e.g., George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 146. Cf. Ronald H. Nash, *The New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 177: "It is our contention that evangelicalism is not new . . . It is simply and plainly Christian orthodoxy speaking to the theological, social, and philosophical needs of the twentieth century."

5. Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice," VIII The Church. Emphasis mine.

6. Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice," VI Gospel.

that such actions "constitute a central part of the church's mission given to her by Jesus Christ."[7] It might be sensible to differentiate between the christological and soteriological components of the gospel and the effects, results, and implications that the gospel will have on a given society. It does not follow, however, that the enactment of the transformative social "implications" of the gospel through the church should be excluded from functioning evidentially in regard to saving faith. It is, likewise, hard to square the document's removal of social activism from the church's mission given the central role of social justice in the inspired texts of both the Old and New Testaments.[8]

Perhaps, in response the drafters would reply: "Yes, social justice matters but the biblical commands to live justly, though important, are not the gospel." My response would be to argue that the inspired, infallible deposit of Holy Scripture requires more of us than the mere Christianity amalgamated in the Statement's definition of the gospel. In addition to the Bible's perfect apostolic revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures also require us to submit to an authoritative, abiding, apostolic ethic. The drafters of the Statement already make this sort of distinction between "the gospel" and other crucial social and ethical issues derived from the teachings of Holy Scripture. This can be observed in their commitment to the traditional orthodox positions on marriage and human sexuality, and their argument for the acceptance of complementarianism, even though neither of those three issues—by their own definition—constitutes "the gospel."

Why, might I ask, is it therefore the case that social justice, a secondary and subsidiary but biblically-commanded "implication and application" of the gospel (by their definition) is deemed to be neither central to the mission of Jesus and the church, nor even allowed to serve as mere evidence of saving faith, while other "implications and applications" of the gospel, namely marriage, sexual ethics, and complementarianism are considered to be so vitally important? I would assume it has to do with the current cultural focus on redefining marriage, sexuality, and gender. While I affirm that the church ought to be clear about these issues on the basis of the clarity and authority of Scripture, it is also the case that Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the inspired authors of the Old and New Testaments issued authoritative, abiding commands about the practice of social justice in the lives of the covenant people and in the societies they inhabited.[9]

7. Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice," VIII The Church.

8. Of the multitude of scriptural examples that could be provided to demonstrate the indisputable relationship of social justice to God's character, covenant faithfulness, and to his abiding commands to his people in both the Old and New covenants to extend justice to the poor, oppressed, widows, orphans, and sojourners see e.g., Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:9–10, 13–14, 15; Deut 10:17–18; 14:28–29; 15; Pss 103:6; 106:3; 146:5–10; Isa 1:16; Amos 2:6–7; 5:12, 24; Ezek 22:29; Zech 7:9; Mal 3:1–5; Mt 5:6, 9, 16, 42, 43–45; 6:2–4; 12:15–21; Lk 4:18–19; 11:42–45.

9. See footnote 8 for scriptural examples of the centrality of social justice to the character and abiding commands of God throughout salvation history.

Furthermore, I would contend that, historically speaking, the position taken by the Statement constitutes a deviation from evangelicalism, rather than a return to its roots. Compare, for example, the spirit of Ascol and MacArthur's Statement with the ethos of the following alternative statement:

> We acknowledge that God requires justice. But we have not proclaimed or demonstrated his justice to an unjust American society. Although the Lord calls us to defend the social and economic rights of the poor and oppressed, we have mostly remained silent. We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines . . . We affirm that God abounds in mercy and that he forgives all who repent and turn from their sins. So we call our fellow evangelical Christians to demonstrate repentance in a Christian discipleship that confronts the social and political injustice of our nation . . . We proclaim no new gospel, but the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, frees people from sin so that they might praise God through works of righteousness. By this declaration, we endorse no political ideology or party, but call our nation's leaders and people to that righteousness which exalts a nation."[10]

I can just picture the response to such a statement, "Perhaps," one may say, "this is a quote from one of those troublemaking 'Red Letter Christians.'" Or, "maybe" one might conjecture, "it is from one of those bleeding heart evangelical 'millennials' we hear so much about. You know, the ones who want to turn the United States into Venezuela whilst simultaneously ruining their chances at buying a house because of their addiction to having smashed Avocado toast for breakfast."[11]

To the shock of many evangelicals who cringe at the seemingly egregious "crime" of caring about other human beings, this is not the Facebook post of a 27-year old hipster evangelical barista wearing a Rob Bell t-shirt. This is the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, a document from 1973 signed by conservative evangelical luminaries such as Carl F. H. Henry, Richard Mouw, Robert Webber, and Bernard Ramm.

Carl F. H. Henry was the inaugural editor of Christianity Today magazine, the leading theologian of the neo-evangelical movement in the United States, and a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and many other evangelical institutions. He was also the past president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) from

10. "Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973)," *Evangelicals For Social Action*, accessed January 6, 2020, https://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/about-esa-2/history/chicago-declaration-evangelical-social-concern/.

11. Sam Levin, "Millionaire tells millennials: if you want a house, stop buying avocado toast," *The Guardian*, accessed January 6, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/15/australian-millionaire-millennials-avocado-toast-house.

1967–1970.[12] In his 1971 book, *A Plea For Evangelical Demonstration*, Henry argued that "[t]o do nothing about social wrongs is to do the wrong thing" and that "an evangelical commitment to earnest and energetic social involvement" is needed in which Christians engage "actively wherever possible in the struggle for social righteousness to the full limit of personal ability and competence.[13]

This is a long way from the Ascol's recent assessment that social activism is neither "evidence of saving faith" nor "a central part of the church's mission."[14] Henry has elsewhere famously shown how the doctrinal purity of the gospel is meant to exist side by side with a thoroughgoing commitment to social justice. He asserts:

> The God of the Bible is the God of justice and of justification. The Christian evangelist has a message doubly relevant to the modern scene: he knows that justice is due to all because a just God created mankind in His holy image, and he knows that all men need justification because the Holy Creator sees us as rebellious sinners.[15] [/EXT]

Henry entertained none of the delusions of the "social utopia"[16] chased after by the social gospel, nor did he think that the gospel was equivalent to a "socio-political program or political ideology."[17] Yet, he passionately advocated and practiced a form of evangelical Christianity that looked beyond ministering to "the victims of social injustice" and sought "hopeful ways" of "remedying and eliminating the causes of that social injustice."[18] Indeed, Henry recognized a "Biblical mandate for social involvement" and he was attempting to construct "a coherent evangelical social ethic that sought to fuse Biblical theology with political theory."[19] Henry's evangelical social ethic operated in accordance with a biblical framework for social engagement that included:

> "the solidarity of the human race," "the equality of all men in view of divine creation," "the offer of pardon for sin," "the responsibility for personal

12. For a complete biography see Robert H. Krapohl, "The Life of Carl Henry," *Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding*, accessed January 7, 2020, https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/carl-f-h-henry/the-life-of-carl-henry/.

13. Carl F. H. Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 106, 122. Emphasis mine.

14. Ascol, "The Statement on Social Justice," VIII The Church.

15. Carl F. H. Henry, "Facing a New Day in Evangelism," *Berlin World Congress on Evangelism*, 1966 (Wheaton College Billy Graham Center Archives), 4–5.

16. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal and National Righteousness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1984), 102. My emphasis.

17. Henry, *A Plea For Evangelical Demonstration*, 67.

18. Henry, *A Plea For Evangelical Demonstration*, 122. Emphasis mine. Cf. Augustus Cerillo, Jr., and Murray W. Dempster, "Carl F.H. Henry's Early Apologetic for An Evangelical Social Ethic, 1942–1956," *JETS* 34, no. 3 (1991): 366, 368.

19. Cerillo Jr., and Dempster, "Carl F.H. Henry's Early Apologetic," 366, 379.

> purity," "the use of wealth as a stewardship," and "the duty of work as part of an earthly existence which is a discipline and preparation for eternity."[20]

Many evangelicals today would continue to affirm these foundational concepts and some would significantly expand the list to include: healthcare as a human right, quality education for all, social safety nets for the elderly and the poor, religious freedom for all, the elimination of racism and bigotry from society, ending sex trafficking and exploitation, domestic and foreign policies that promote preemptive peace-making rather than pre-emptive war, a commitment to climate justice and the wise stewardship of the planet, criminal justice reform, just and compassionate immigration policies, and a firm commitment to pro-life causes and legislation.

As evangelicals engage in spiritual warfare we must do so by identifying a new biblical framework for evangelical social engagement in the 21st century, building on, and at some points course-correcting certain aspects of Henry's original vision.[21] Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal—and all other orthodox Christians—must work together to construct an ecumenical biblical framework for transformative spiritual warfare through social action in accordance with the apostolic witness to the social and soteriological aspects of the gospel and the faith once delivered to the saints.

One may notice that my suggested updated framework for evangelical social action includes elements from a variety of political parties and platforms. It argues for both pro-life legislation and social safety nets for the elderly and the poor.[22] Thus, an ecumenical evangelical social ethic must exist prior to and above a Christian's commitment to any political party. Christians must exist in a state of perpetual discomfort and cognitive dissonance, never allowing themselves to collapse their commitment to Christ into any political ideology or party, and never confusing or equating adherence to any particular political approach with authentic faithfulness to the Gospel. Furthermore, in order to engage effectively in this manner, Christians must expand the way that they conceive of the activity of demonic spiritual forces in the world. A de-gnosticization process must take place in which the spiritual reality of demonic forces is affirmed and retained but is integrated within a paradigm that envisions the Powers as exercising their oppressive agency in the world through the mediation of the external forms of human social structures, systems, and ideologies.

20. Cerillo Jr., and Dempster, "Carl F.H. Henry's Early Apologetic," 375.

21. See e.g., Cerillo Jr., and Dempster, "Carl F.H. Henry's Early Apologetic," 374 where Henry is cited as referring to "Roman Catholic imperialism" that opposed "the free proclamation of a saving gospel." Cerillo Jr., and Dempster argue that Henry "thought that growing Roman Catholic political power threatened American freedom and democracy, the public school system and the time-honored principle of Church-state separation" (374). Henry's suspicion and hostility toward Roman Catholicism must be unequivocally rejected by contemporary evangelicals.

22. Henry himself "condemned profiteering and the exploitation of the poor" (Cerillo Jr., and Dempster, "Carl F.H. Henry's Early Apologetic," 377) and believed that "God requires justices . . . [and] calls us to defend the social and economic rights of the poor and oppressed" (*Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern*, 1973).

Walter Wink's Phenomenology of the Powers as a Framework for Evangelical Activism

The suggestion of a structural, systemic, and ideological framework for thinking of the activity of demonic Powers among evangelicals often elicits a response of suspicion and premature rejection. It is assumed by many that this sort of thinking advocates for a demythologization of the Powers along the lines of that which was attempted by Rudolf Bultmann. In his program of demythologization, Bultmann rejected all forms of supernaturalism and the miraculous, seeking instead to discover the kernel of truth located underneath the "primitive," "mythical," and "rationally incredible" claims of the Bible.[23] For Bultmann, the demythologization of demonology and dogmatics had an anthropological and existential aim, namely to discard the "mythical" elements of the biblical text in order to "to talk about human existence."[24] Bultmann's program of demythologization must be totally rejected. Likewise, the attempt by some liberation theologians to reduce the reality of demonic Powers to mythical metaphors for social structures or systems, is likewise, theologically deficient and biblically unjustifiable.[25]

The common evangelical assumption, however, that Wink's theology is a form of demythologization is demonstrably false. Wink himself argues in the following manner about his volumes on the Powers:

> [they] are themselves the record of my own pilgrimage away from a rather naive assurance that the "principalities and powers" mentioned in the New Testament could be "demythologized," that is, rendered without remainder into the categories of modern sociology, depth psychology, and general systems theory.[26] [/EXT]

In the same manner, Wink clearly asserts that the Powers are not "mere projections" or "creations of our own unconscious psychic processes."[27] Likewise, according to Wink, "gods, spirits, and demons are not mere personifications or hypostatizations."[28] Wink himself argues that Bultmann's understanding of "myth" was based on a "wrong foundation" because it defined myth as "a falsifying objectification of reality" and translated its meaning to existential categories.[29] It would seem, then, that any

23. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation (1941)" in *New Testament & Mythology and other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 8.

24. Rudolf Bultmann, "On the Problem of Demythologizing (1952)" in *New Testament & Mythology and other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 99.

25. Cf. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 15.

26. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5. My emphasis. Wink further denies that the Powers should be understood as mere metaphors for "institutions, social systems, and political structures."

27. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 140.

28. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 136.

29. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 142–145.

simplistic labelling of Wink as "Bultmannian" is either disingenuous, ignorant, incompetent, or willfully deceptive.[30]

Equally problematic to demythologizing approaches to the Powers is the inadvertent gnostic separation of the Powers from the mediation of material reality that is common in most conservative streams of Christian theology. Interpretations that gnosticize the Powers relegate their activity to an entirely invisible realm and envision them as being dealt with solely through individual, esoteric spiritual warfare that is completely divorced from any sort of external human mediation—whether structural or personal. The problem is rooted in the frequent assumption that because the Powers are "spiritual" and located "in the heavenly places," they therefore do not operate "on the human plane" and thus "Christian warfare is fought . . . in the spiritual realm."[31]

Best argues, for example, that in Ephesians 6:12 "our struggle is not against anything human." Nor is it a struggle, says Best, that "may come from human foes" through for example, "persecution, harassment, temptation, poverty, or injustice."[32] Likewise, according to Abbott, Barry has argued that the fight against "the power of evil" is "directly spiritual" and does not involve the Powers "acting through physical and human agency."[33] Thus, for Barry, the spiritual response of believers consists of the mere contemplation of the heavenly things and communion with God but not offensive action.[34]

Calvin, while correctly asserting that wrestling against mere flesh and blood would be "useless," then proceeds to argue that believers must therefore go "straight to the enemy" who is "concealed," "spiritual, and thus "invisible."[35] But how is one meant to contend with an invisible, spiritual entity that has been divorced

30. I'm convinced that one of the reasons evangelicals tend to not identify with Wink's theology is that, while it sounds scholarly to call yourself Barthian, Reformed, or Wrightian, self-identifying as "Winkian" makes you sound more like a person who belongs to a sorcerer's guild or to a forgotten extraterrestrial people group from a distant planet in Star Trek. Well, you can call me an intergalactic wizard if you like, but by God, I am an evangelical Winkian. Here I stand with wand in hand. Beam me up, Walter!

31. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Verse-by-Verse Exposition* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1968), 127. Generally an excellent commentator, Bruce is elsewhere more careful and balanced in his commentary. Unfortunately, in this instance his explanation leads to an inadvertent deficiency in spiritual praxis. Cf. the same issue in Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 284: "they are also not called to more intensive human activity."

32. Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 584, 593.

33. T. K. Abbott, *Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1964 [1st ed. 1897]), 183 citing A. Barry, *The Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* (C. J. Ellicott's New Testament Commentary for English Readers, New York, 1896).

34. Abbott, *Ephesians*, 183.

35. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, accessed January 8, 2020, https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41/calcom41.iv.vii.html.

from any tangible personal or structural mediation? The practical application of this theological concept is not addressed by Calvin. More careful and nuanced, however, is the exegesis of Thomas Aquinas. He shows that while our battle is not against flesh and blood, nevertheless, the spiritual Powers work through flesh and blood—that is to say, human beings and structures—to carry out their oppressive attack against humanity. Aquinas argues that "when flesh and blood attack us, it is not of themselves principally but from a higher moving force, namely, from the devil."[36]

In contemporary theology, the primary advocate for the position that the Powers work through external means is Walter Wink.[37] The essence of Wink's theology of the Powers is that every external, earthly, and human Power operates by means of a real, internal, governing spiritual Power.[38] He derives his theology from a comprehensive lexical study of the various New Testament words for power. Focusing in particular on the terms used in Colossians 1:16, namely θρόνος ("thrones"), κυριότης ("dominions"), ἀρχή ("rulers"), and ἐξουσία ("powers" or "authorities"), Wink demonstrates that the New Testament words and concepts for the Powers refer to both human/earthly and heavenly/spiritual realities. Strikingly, for example, Wink's lexical research reveals that the words ἀρχή and ἄρχων in pre-Christian literature, the Septuagint, and the New Testament primarily refer to earthly rulers and human structures of power, like governments and kingdoms. These terms were later "extended" in the Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian literature to also include spiritual realities.[39] Likewise, in the New Testament ἐξουσία refers "in the vast majority of cases" to "ideological justifications" and "political or religious legitimations" and not—in the first place—to demonic powers.[40] Wink helpfully sums up the biblical language of the Powers by focusing on Colossians 1:16 in which the Powers are referred to by Paul as both earthly and heavenly.[41] In describing how both the inner and outer aspects of Powers function, Wink writes:

> As the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the "chair" of an organization, laws—in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes. Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form—be it a church, a nation, or an economy—and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestations in the world . . . When a particular Power becomes idolatrous, placing itself

36. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians*, accessed January 8, 2020, https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Eph.C6.L2.n350.3, Section 355. Emphasis mine.

37. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Walter Wink, *When the Powers Fall: Reconciliation in the Healing of Nations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

38. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.

39. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 10, 14, 15.

40. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 16.

41. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 10, 11; cf. 12–16.

> above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic. The church's task is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purposes in the world . . .[42]

Wink's theology assumes that the Powers were created good and have fallen, which is commensurate with the historic orthodox position.[43] The goal of Christian spiritual warfare under Wink's reading, then, is to discern the Powers behind the external structures, and to unmask and engage the Powers through confronting their external mediating forms in order to bring them into reconciliation with God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Wink's phenomenology of the Powers offers a tangible framework for the praxis of evangelical social activism as spiritual warfare.

Wink's tendency to depersonalize the Powers, however, has typically been an area of concern for evangelicals. The issue of the "personality" of demons for Wink—and for all of us—is not, however, of primary concern for the praxis of spiritual warfare as social activism. Aquinas and the medieval exegetes went through great lengths to outline a complex speculative hierarchy of angelic and demonic beings, and this has had virtually no effect on the day to day spiritual experience of most contemporary Christians. When we feel that we are under spiritual attack we do not typically consult Aquinas or Dante to figure out which rung of the heavens our particular angel or demon hails from. And, when we feel that we are being personally spiritually attacked we do not ask: "Is this the nefarious doing of a demon by the name of Leonardo?" If our breakfast has been suspiciously ruined, we do not typically inquire as to whether or not this resulted from an incursion of Tricia the toast devil, dark overlord of scorched bread. It is not the metaphysical status or personality of the demonic Powers that is of primary concern to orthodoxy and orthopraxy; it is, rather, the affirmation of the real and actual spiritual existence of the Powers that matters for Christian theology and evangelical social praxis. Wink unequivocally affirms the reality and danger of the spiritual Powers, and there is, therefore, no reason for evangelicals to be suspicious of his theology of the Powers.

The scope and array of demonic forces that exist may well include beings that are personal, impersonal, or some mysterious mix or hierarchy of both. We cannot, however, precisely discern the exact metaphysical status of the demonic beings that exist from Holy Scripture. The fine details of their nature and operation remain, in large part, a mystery and a topic of speculative theology. This is why, in his theology of the Powers, Wink explains that he has intentionally "bracketed the question of the metaphysical status of the Powers" in order that he might treat them phenomenologically, focusing on humanity's experience of the Powers rather

42. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.

43. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.14.16 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush, NSW: Society of St Paul, 1994), CCC 391 and 392.

than attempting to engage in speculative theology characterized by fascination and conjecture about their ontological features or personalities.[44]

With speculative questions of demonic metaphysics aside—and with no apologies to Leonardo or Tricia (stay away from my toast you she-devil!)—we can now return to a focus on the contribution that Wink's theology of the Powers can make toward the development of an evangelical social ethic and praxis. Wink, basing his exegesis on the teaching of Jesus about demonic spirits in Luke 11:24–26, argues that demonic spirits need to be embodied or else they roam restless. He correctly concludes that "demons can become manifest only through concretion in material reality."[45] What Wink offers to a praxis for evangelical social activism is a model that focuses on the governance and agency of evil spiritual Powers over corporate and societal structures, systems, and ideologies that demonically oppress mass volumes of people through what essentially amounts to a multitude of undetected cases of cultural collective possession.[46] Wink notes that "[i]n a highly individualistic society like ours it is rare to encounter single individuals who are possessed. Instead, the demonic has in our time taken the form of mass psychosis"[47] in which "the demonic has been installed at the heart of national policy" along with an assortment of other political, social, and cultural institutions, offices, and platforms that exert influence over our contemporary cultures.[48] It is into this reality that the church is called to corporately put on Christ through faith and baptism, and to engage in the mission of God by the power and protection that God provides in his corporate, covenantal, and ecclesial armor.

Ephesians, the Armor of God, and Evangelical Activism

The Corporate Component of the Ecclesial Armor of God

In Ephesians 2 we read that Jews and Gentiles have been "brought near by the blood of Christ" (2:13) and made into "one new man" (2:15). They have been reconciled in the one body of Christ through the cross (2:16) and drawn together to be "a holy temple in the Lord" (2:21) and a "dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (2:22). Later, in Ephesians 3:10, Paul asserts that it is "through the church" that "the manifold wisdom

44. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 8.

45. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 106.

46. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 43. Wink also affirms the reality of "inner personal demonic" possession of individual persons.

47. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 50.

48. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 52. Cf. 4, 28: "The media have made a sensation out of a few rare cases of possession of pubescent youth, with no comprehension whatever of Satan's grip on an entire civilization. Why should Satan reveal himself more often in individual cases when he can, from invisibility, preside over an entire global culture that spreads out over the whole surface of the planet . . ."

of God" is made known "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."[49] We have all been called, says Paul, "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3) just as there is one body, one spirit, one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," and "one God and Father of all" (4:4–6). We are, furthermore, called to build up the body of Christ until we attain the unity of the faith and "mature manhood" unto "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (4:12–13). All of these images highlight the centrality of the unity of the church in Ephesians.

In addition to this focus on corporate inclusion in the church, Ephesians contains a significant focus on ethical paraenesis which spans from Ephesians 4:17–6:9. Some exegetes argue that Paul's ethical teaching extends even further—continuing on to 6:20. In Ephesians 6:10–20, they argue, Paul engages his readers in an ethical clothing metaphor that focuses on the moral struggle of individual believers against the powers of darkness.[50] Yet, I am convinced by Neufeld's analysis that Ephesians 6:10–20 is not primarily about the "faithful and moral life" of individual Christians that is "marked by resistance to temptations."[51] With a growing number of interpreters, I contend that the divine armor metaphor is intended to refer to the corporate and ecclesial clothing of the church. The church, therefore, rather than individual believers, are clothed in the singular ecclesial armor of God himself.[52] The armor is not merely from God, mass produced, as it were, and then extended to individuals as solo spiritual warriors apart from the church. Rather, the armor is God's own singular divine armor and believers are communally clothed in it as the one mystical body of Christ, the church into which they are incorporated through faith and baptism. Apart from the church there is no protection. Apart from the

49. Emphasis mine.

50. See e.g., John A. Allan, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 135, 138, who interprets the armor of God metaphor as a reference to "the battle of the moral life" in which believers are engaged in "a struggle for inner integrity of moral character." Cf. Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 436, who sees this as a a metaphor focused on cultivating "virtue" by "practicing truthfulness" and "by becoming more righteous in . . . behavior, and essentially by becoming increasingly pure in thought and action." Arnold sees the metaphor as having a missional (450) and doctrinal (445) purpose as well. Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians,* Section 363 which focuses on the armor as sexual purity, and Section 365 in which Aquinas argues that believers conquer the powers of darkness through the "moral virtues."

51. Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 140 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 152.

52. Scholars who hold to the corporate view of the divine armor include: Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God,* 16, 93, 98–99; J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: James Clark, 1904), 133, 135; Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, Anchor Bible, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 767, 773 fn91, 773. Robert A. Wild, S.J. "The Warrior and the Prisoner: Some Reflections on Ephesians 6:10–20," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 287; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 436, 437, 442; Timothy G. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 70, 81, 90, 155–156, 157; Martin Kitchen, *Ephesians* (London: Routledge, 1994), 114, 116, 118, and 122.

church there is no sanctification. And, apart from the church there is no salvation, for only through the church, in the church, by the church, and as the church is the fullness of God actively able to transform the life of believers for the sake and life of the world.[53]

A corporate and christological reading of the armor makes the best sense of the frequent emphasis on corporate ecclesial categories in Ephesians. Furthermore, the use of the plural form of the verb ἐνδύω ("you [pl.] put on") in Ephesians 6:11 followed by an assortment of singular metaphorical pieces of armor lends weight to this interpretation.[54] Given that the same verb, ἐνδύω, is used of the corporate concept of "putting on Christ" in Romans 13:14, which in Galatians 3:27 is directly linked to baptism, it becomes clear that what we have in Ephesians 6:10–20 is a parallel metaphorical explanation of how the many become one in Christ. Believers take off the corporate "old man" (namely, Adam) and put on the corporate "new man" (namely, Christ) in Ephesians 4:22–24 (cf. Col 3:9–11), and are then clothed in the singular spiritual armor of the Messiah himself (Eph 6:10–20) in order to carry out his covenantal mission of bringing salvation, justice, truth, and peace to the world through the ministry of the gospel. The corporate old man and new man (gk. ἄνθρωπον) refer to the corresponding manner of life under each corporate head, and not to a vague existentialist "old self" and "new self" as many interpretations imply.[55] Ironically, that sort of individualistic reading has more in common with Bultmann than with Paul.

The most convincing exegetical detail that gives weight to the corporate view of the armor is that the Old Testament intertexts in Ephesians draw from passages that clearly refer to God's own divine armor. Virtually all commentators acknowledge that Paul is alluding to the Old Testament divine warrior motif which occurs in texts such as Isaiah 11:4, 5; 59:17; and Wisdom 5:17–20.[56] Reading with these intertexts in mind fundamentally transforms the way the metaphor functions in regard to believers and the mission of the church in Ephesians. Instead of communicating another set of ethical virtues for believers to cultivate in their personal quests for

53. Cf. Cyprian of Catharge, *Epistle* 73.21 as cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 224, CCC 846: *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, "outside the church there is no salvation."

54. The shoes (τοὺς πόδας) in Ephesians 6:15 are, strictly speaking, spoken of in the plural. Yet, since every other piece of the armor is singular it is obvious that the shoes are plural because, by necessity, they must be spoken of as a pair.

55. The ESV, NRSV, NIV render the phrases "the old self" and "the new self" whereas the RSV comes much closer by translating the phrases "your old nature" and "the new nature" respectively. The KJV translates the greek literally here as "old man" and "new man" which I find to be the most theologically clear, and closest to the original corporate sense intended by Paul in Ephesians 4:22–24, Colossians 3:9–11, and Romans 5:12–21. Cf. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 442, who sees the putting on of the armor of God as the "functional equivalent of putting on the new humanity (cf. 4:24)."

56. See e.g., Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 436. Cf. John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2001), 287; M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 760, 767, 768, 773; Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 205, 206.

holiness, the Ephesians are called to be corporately clothed in God's messianic divine armor in order to fulfill the covenant faithfulness of God through the embodiment of the person, mission, power, and protection of Jesus Christ. The armor, therefore, while no doubt resulting in personal transformation, is primarily meant to highlight the missional vocation of the church rather than the progressive sanctification of individuals. It is through living out the mission of God that believers are spiritually renewed in the image of the living God. That this is then connected to prayer for "all the saints" and boldness in ministry in verses 18–20, further situates the metaphor of spiritual warfare within the context of the corporate continuation of God's righteousness through the covenant faithfulness of Jesus Christ carried out in the missional vocation of the church.

[B] The Covenantal and Missional Component of the Ecclesial Armor of God

If, as I have argued, the armor of God is God's singular divine armor that clothes the corporate body of Christ into which believers are incorporated through faith and baptism, then it stands to follow that all of the elements of the armor should be conceived of as items that belong to God and function to further his mission in the world. This is God's own armor, God's truth, God's righteousness, God's gospel of peace, God's readiness, God's faithfulness, God's Spirit, and God's Word. As Marcus Barth argues

> Terms such as "truth," "righteousness," "steadfastness," "faith," "peace," "salvation," "the Spirit," and "the word of God," occur when the ground and effect of God's attitude and action is described in relation to the people with whom he has made a covenant. All these terms denote a social relationship, i.e. the covenant which is at the same time personal and political, saving and ethical.[57]

There is a rich, though small, strand that exists within the history of interpretation of Ephesians 6:10–20 that recognizes this covenantal aspect to the metaphor. Neufeld refers to the components of the armor as "covenantal virtues," which he then sees in Ephesians as "exercised by the people."[58] For Neufeld, "Yahweh appears enveloped in those virtues which assure the survival of the covenant community."[59] The intertext from Isaiah 59:21 feeds Paul's reference to the sword of the Spirit and the word of God in Ephesians 6:17. These Old Testament passages draw us to Paul's use of metalepsis which is a process in which an author cites a small portion of a text with the entire original text and context in mind in order to apply its meaning to a new situation and

57. Barth, *Ephesians*, 796. My emphasis.

58. Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God,* 32–33.

59. Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 36. Neufeld is specifically referring here to the virtues of "righteousness and salvation."

reality.[60] The immediate original context of the Isaianic passages reveal that "πνεῦμα and ῥήμα appear in Isa. 59:21 as the content of the διαθήκη" that is, the covenant which "the Lord will establish with the recipient and his seed."[61] Neufeld concludes by suggesting that it is possible that "the Ephesian author is shaped by the conviction that the covenant hoped for in Isa. 59:21 is being realized."[62]

Similarly, Perkins points out a parallel usage of Isaiah 11 and 59 in a divine armor metaphor that takes place in the eschatological text of 1Q28b 5:21–26. In that setting, the prince of the congregation establishes a "new covenant" and "the kingdom of his people forever [to judge the poor with justice]."[63] She notes that

> [i]n the Essene text, God's blessing on the leader of the renewed covenant people equips him to be the agent of divine justice and judgment among the peoples. In Ephesians the enemies to be resisted are no longer human but spiritual, quasi-demonic powers that govern the lower world.[64]

On the relationship between covenant faithfulness and the vocational mission of the church, N. T. Wright's exegesis of God's righteousness in 2 Corinthians 5:21 offers an illuminating interpretive key, one that will also prove to be instructive for determining the function of righteousness in Ephesians 6.[65] Wright demonstrates that in 2 Corinthians, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ("the righteousness of God") is not

> a human status in virtue of which the one who has "become" it stands "righteous" before God, as in Lutheran soteriology. It is the covenant faithfulness of the one true God, now active through the paradoxical

60. On the process of metalepsis, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), see esp. 20. Cf. 24, 63.

61. Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 144–145.

62. Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 144–145.

63. Pheme Perkins, *Ephesians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 143–144.

64. Perkins, *Ephesians*, 144.

65. Though space does not allow here for an extended treatment of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as "covenant faithfulness," Wright's reading is based upon a strong scriptural case that demonstrates the use of the term and related righteousness language in biblical texts as a reference to the concept of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises to bless the world through Abraham's offspring. Wright (N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013], 800 quoting Onesti and Brauch, 1993, p. 828f) sums up this view: "An essential component of Israel's religious experience was that Yahweh was not only Lord of Law but also the one who was faithful to it. God was faithful to the covenant. God's righteousness was shown by saving actions in accordance with this covenant relationship . . . Righteousness is not primarily an ethical quality; rather, it characterizes the character or action of God who deals rightly within a covenant relationship . . . The covenant faithfulness of God, the righteousness of God, is shown by Yahweh's saving acts." This covenantal aspect to δικαιοσύνη is now recognized by a majority of New Testament scholars as a key component to usage of the δικ- word group in many Old Testament and New Testament passages.

> Christ-shaped ministry of Paul, reaching out with the offer of reconciliation to all who hear his bold preaching.[66]

By applying this covenantal understanding of "God's righteousness" to the themes of the body of Christ and the armor of God in Ephesians, the church is now corporately presented (just as Paul was individually presented in 2 Cor 5:21) as "an incarnation of the covenant faithfulness of God."[67] Clothed in the covenant faithfulness of God, the church is thereby required not merely to "stand firm" but to "stand against" the Powers as a part of the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God through the ministry of reconciliation.

This is a crucial point to make because in the individualistic readings of Ephesians 6:10–20, it is common to encounter interpretations in which "stand firm" is taken to mean "stand still."[68] Believers are led to envision that their spiritual warfare takes place in an entirely stationary and defensive fashion, as they shout Bible verses at random invisible demons while the world is crushed under the weight of systemic and structural evils that are governed by demonic Powers. These Powers are permitted to persist, undetected and unencumbered by the church as it remains perpetually distracted by its focus on gnostic and narcissistic individual spiritual battles. While evangelicals in the West have been wondering "why is there frequent spiritual activity in the Global South but not in the United States?" the Powers have been hard at work, bewitching and possessing the masses through the structures, systems, and ideologies that hold our "enlightened" society captive in the collective cultural darkness.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

It is the Powers who orchestrate every human atrocity in history through the mediation of personal and structural human agents thereby oppressing humanity in

66. N.T Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5.21 (1993)," in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 68–76.

67. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God," 74.

68. Cf. e.g., Best, *Ephesians*, 588, who argues that the "struggle is essentially defensive" and that "believers are not ordered to advance but to stand firm" and "hold the position which had been won for them." Cf. 611, where he asserts that "the only attitude then can be one of defence; no attack is possible." Cf. Marcus L. Loane, *Three Letters From Prison* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), 71 who thinks "stand" means to ""hold your ground." He argues that even the sword is "entirely for defense," 74. Cf. Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 285, who argues for standing "defensively" takes a rather defeatist interpretation of the outcome of the battle, writing that "[t]o be left standing at the end and not carried off the field as a casualty of war is all that one can reasonably hope for." Cf. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians,* 168, where he argues that "Paul says nothing in Ephesians about taking an aggressive posture toward the world." While I find Gombis' exegesis of the corporate divine warrior motif to be among the finest scholarship published on the topic, I disagree substantially with how he sees this warfare being carried out in practice. Gombis views spiritual warfare as a form of non-aggressive "resistance" that relinquishes "the pursuit of control in the political sphere" and resists "the opportunity to exercise power in culture" (125).

an attempt to impede the coming of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Only, they never come up on our spiritual radar because we are looking for the devils of medieval artwork rather than the faces, ideas, and institutions of ordinary people who have become mediating pawns in a cosmic war. Thus, in contemporary Christianity, the Powers have benefited from our passive abdication of action in favor of our pious and harmless "thoughts and prayers." They have never faced the force of our full ecclesial assault. In fact, as we have remained aloof in our gnostic religiosity, the Powers have actually been strengthened. By excusing ourselves from action, we have removed ourselves from the front lines of the spiritual war. We have restricted our sphere of influence to the circumference of our sanctuaries relegating our spiritual response to the Powers to subsidiary spaces of minimal importance like the sidebar of our weekly prayer bulletins.

Paul does not command us to "stand still"; he commands us to "stand against" the Powers,[69] to rise against them, to reject them, to run headfirst at them, and to disarm them by the power of the gospel. The "readiness given by the gospel of peace," is not a stationary, standby "readiness" that stands still and stands down while awaiting further orders in a state of missional flux and evangelical ambiguity or apathy. We have received our holy orders, and we have been equipped with God's own righteousness and God's own readiness to successfully fulfill those orders. Therefore, let us race into the spiritual battle knowing that we do so, not as a network of salvation solo soldiers relying on our own acquisition of virtue to empower our performance, but as one body in Christ, wearing the very armor of God, partaking in the divine life, fullness, and power of God. The time for standing still has long passed. Let us together stand up, stand firm, and stand against the Powers as the body of Christ, the Church, the corporate ambassador of the covenant faithfulness of God through which he is making all things new.

69. The greek verbs used in Ephesians 6, ἵστημι and ἀνθίστημι refer not only to "standing firm" but just as frequently to "standing against."