

A Theological Response to “Evicting the Enemy: Rediscovering Spiritual Warfare in Church Planting”

By David M.

David M. is currently finishing a theology degree in the United States. His experience is with Muslim and Buddhist peoples in East Asia, mainly doing evangelism and nurturing new groups of believers. He works remotely with a team that builds mobile applications for field teams, such as audio distribution apps for recorded story sets.



Note from **Seedbed** Editors: *This article is a response to Derek P.’s article in the previous issue of Seedbed (May 2021) entitled “Evicting the Enemy: Rediscovering Spiritual Warfare in Church Planting.” Seedbed does not endorse any particular view but welcomes diverse perspectives and constructive dialogue on crucial issues in frontier church planting.*

[Read the original article here.](#)

I am thankful for the diverse body of Christ and its many expressions. While I do not know Derek personally, I count him a brother in the Lord and honor him for his many years of service among indigenous peoples in North America. My wife’s tribe was reached by missionaries and experienced a movement of God over a century ago. I am filled with gratitude for the sacrificial service of missionaries such as Derek. With that said, my prayer is that our correspondence is marked by Christian charity. The aim of my response is to sharpen one another so that we may honor Holy Scripture and the Triune God of Scripture with increasing faith, hope, and love.

Let me begin by concisely outlining [Derek's article](#), which is divided into six headings:

1. *(Intro)* This is mainly his personal story.
2. *A Biblical Framework for Spiritual Warfare*. This is a fantastic overview of the Bible's big-picture story through the lens of Satan and demons.
3. *The Deception of Western Secular Syncretism*. Derek helpfully identifies ways the Enemy has infiltrated the West.
4. *Shift in Worldview, Shift in Focus*. Derek describes three shifts. This is where he drills down on the idea that casting out demons should be normative.
5. *Announcing the Kingdom, Spiritual Authority, and Identity*. This section comments throughout Luke 10.
6. *Spiritual Warfare in Practice*. This functions as a mini handbook for how to cast out demons.

With this structural outline in mind, let me set up the conversation in the following section. This may seem longer than a typical introduction, but I believe it is necessary to dwell here first before we can proceed further.

Let's Go Diving: Theology Drives Methodology

Consider an iceberg where the visible bit above the water line represents practical aspects of ministry, such as casting out demons. Below the water line represents the fundamental things we believe. In the opening paragraph of the article, we observe the principle that "theology drives methodology." Missionary-theologian Karl Dahlfred (2013) demonstrates this principle in his book by the same title. The idea is that an organic relationship exists between the moves happening under water (changing our beliefs) and changes in practice above water (the things we do).

To continue with the iceberg analogy, it seems that at least two types of shifts happened for Derek. One shift is a reaction to our beliefs not making sense of what we experience. Since experience is concrete and related to day-to-day life, I am speaking about it as “above the water line.” This describes the dissonance experienced as Derek encountered demons but did not have the worldview to grapple with them. The second type of shift happens beneath the water line. Beliefs change about what Scripture teaches which then send warning signals up to the surface, notifying us that practice is now out of alignment. When the bottom of the iceberg moves, the top must follow suit because of the nature of the iceberg as a whole unit. Similarly, beliefs and practices do not change in isolation but move as an organic whole.

Does the first or second type of shift describe Derek’s journey? I propose that section one (his personal journey) describes the first type of shift. It is about solving the cognitive dissonance felt when what we experience doesn’t align with how we see God’s Word. Sections two, three, and four address the second type of shift under the water line. What do we believe about a biblical framework of spiritual warfare (section two)? How has the Enemy infiltrated how we fundamentally view the world (section three)? What needs to shift at the bottom of the iceberg (section four)? Then section five provides exegetical support for the second shift, and section six gives a road map for how to live out the first. With this u-shaped structure, Derek takes us down and then back up again to the surface. We move from the experiences we don’t understand, to the level of belief, and then back up again to learn how to live in light of our changed beliefs.

On this scuba diving tour, I aim to provide some broader perspectives on our surroundings with the intention of ensuring a safe journey for others. Like pointing out the potentially dangerous coral reef and keeping an eye on the dive watch, the intention of this article is to identify the terrain and offer reflections on the route Derek desires us to embark upon. We will see that his route up to the surface is quite specific

because it leads us to a particular (and disputed) view of spiritual warfare. It is worth noting that I agree with Derek on many points. His second section about a biblical theology of spiritual warfare is top notch. I also agree wholeheartedly about our need to cast off a Western syncretic approach to Biblical interpretation.

I want readers to see that for Derek, a shift away from Western Christian syncretism is a shift to a specific view of spiritual warfare. Let me be clear that Derek at no point explicitly argues this. It is what is *not* said but implied that I take issue with. I take issue with it because readers deserve to see a fuller picture than what is offered in the article. My effort is more like filling in gaps during a conversation rather than offering a rebuttal. I am interested in building out our conceptual infrastructure to shed light on the nature of worldview shifts and the important theological implications of different views of spiritual warfare. We need a fuller-orbed understanding of our environmental surroundings in order to make an informed decision about which view of spiritual warfare we accept. We will see that a range of options exists, and readers must decide which of them give us the theological train to carry the freight of demonic experiences. With that said, let's get our diving gear on and head down together. Our first stop addresses sections three and four of Derek's article. Here we will pick up a conceptual framework to think accurately about what we mean by "worldview."

"Worldview": Stacked Blocks or a Complex Web?

Our young daughter loves to stack blocks. She quickly learned that in order to remove a block in the middle, all she has to do is pick up blocks above it, remove the desired block, and set the others back on top. Five key components of any worldview are God, reality (metaphysics/ontology), knowledge (epistemology), humanity (anthropology), and ethics (Treier and Elwell 2017, 951–52; cf. also Moreland and Craig 2017). If we treat them as stacked blocks, we can remove or alter one without affecting the others. We simply remove it and put the rest back on top.

A better way to understand worldviews is to see them as a web. Philosopher and logician W.V. Quine calls it a “web of belief” (Quine and Ullian 1978). When we consider a web, we realize that pulling one end sends reverberations throughout the rest of the entire system.

Derek believes that “many believers and missionaries from Western countries actually need to undergo a worldview shift in order to see and walk in the scriptural teaching on spiritual warfare” (2021, 27–28). My fear is that he treats a worldview like blocks. The web of belief teaches us that when we undergo worldview shifts that enable us to normalize casting out demons, we must be aware of and consider the larger implications in our worldview and consider them in light of Scripture. It is not as simple as the block approach; we must acknowledge the reverberations sent throughout the interconnected web of belief. Derek fails to acknowledge in his article the theological implications of his worldview shifts. Referring to the two types of shifts mentioned above, we need to be aware that both types have theological reverberations. This is hinted at as he explores Luke 10 and other passages (Mark 5), but it is not explicitly acknowledged or fleshed out for readers.

I cannot clearly identify how the shifts of exiting Western syncretism and accepting the deliverance model of spiritual warfare are distinct, overlapping, or interrelated. The nature of a complex web makes these things hard to sort out. But we can say with confidence that both shifts are essentially theological because any discussion of worldview deals with what we believe about God, man, knowledge, reality, and ethics. When Derek asks his readers to accept a deliverance-type of spiritual warfare, he is also asking them to import a complex web of theological commitments which are packed into that system, but which he does not acknowledge up front. I do not believe he has bad intentions, yet it is still important to consider the iceberg-sized web of beliefs that sits behind the practice of casting out demons. If a worldview is a web instead of blocks, then changes in theology (even if they are subtle) must have occurred. Since theological changes are left unstated, Derek offers a

deliverance model of spiritual warfare without disclosing the vast iceberg of theology sitting underneath it.

Changing our theology is a good thing when we are holding our beliefs up to the light of Scripture. Let us always be submitting our whole selves to God while allowing the Word to show us our errors and move us towards further devotion to Christ (Heb. 4:12). I want us to move out of Western syncretism as much as Derek does, but the shifting itself is not the problem. The issue is being aware of what theological commitments we are shifting into. This is not philosophical meandering; this is how worldview shifts work. Pulling on the end of the “reality” side of the web gets us started as we realize that our world is a spiritual battle (Derek’s section two). We must pull on this end to leave Western syncretism, but what reverberations go out into the other four ends? We need to bring the conversation down to the theological ocean floor before applying section six of Derek’s article.

Locating Deliverance Spiritual Warfare in Its Larger Context: One Option Among Many

Our second stop shines the flashlight on four different ways modern Christians view spiritual warfare. Readers should be aware that a range of views concerning spiritual warfare are within the bounds of orthodoxy. Beilby and Eddy edited a volume titled *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* wherein four different perspectives on spiritual warfare are presented and discussed (Belby, Eddy, and Wink 2012). The first system, the world systems model of spiritual warfare, argues that principalities and powers are embedded within oppressive systems in society. Practicing spiritual warfare looks like nonviolent resistance as the church names, unmask, and engages systemic evil. The second system, the classic model, views spiritual warfare as primarily about fighting temptation and sin. Beilby and Eddy write, “In the classic model, with its focus on the ‘weapons’ of repentance, truth, prayer, obedience, worship, and study of the Scriptures, spiritual warfare and Christian growth/discipleship

are seen as virtually one and the same” (2012, 34). The final two views, ground-level and strategic-level warfare, are versions of the deliverance model of spiritual warfare. These systems emphasize directly addressing demonic agents and represent a wide variety of theories about casting out demons.

I anticipate some frustrated readers at this point for my refusal to give a full theological diagnosis of the deliverance model. That is beyond the scope of this response. But I hope we can walk away with a fuller picture of the complex dynamics surrounding conversations about worldview, syncretism, and casting out demons. I want readers to see that a variety of theologies about spiritual warfare are well-developed and accessible in books such as this. They are *theologies* because a specific practice is always rooted in what is under the surface. Each of the four views about spiritual warfare is a live option for Christians to engage with. We would do well to carefully reflect upon the theology underneath each system and weigh each perspective against Scripture as we decide what spiritual warfare looks like in our respective ministry contexts. Recognizing that Derek’s route is only one way up among multiple options is a key part of our scuba diving journey.

Pulling on the Web: An Example of How Belief Affects Practice

The third stop is an application of how the bottom of the iceberg is connected to spiritual warfare systems. If practice (method) is always tethered to belief (theology), then what baseline theological beliefs might lead someone to arrive at a position of normalizing the practice of casting out demons?

Let me turn our attention to one issue by way of example. Each of us has the tendency to create a functional “canon within the canon,” elevating certain biblical passages as “more inspired” than others. We may trade our cultural Western lenses for ones with a better prescription,

but we may still overemphasize and underemphasize certain portions of Scripture. Some, for example, might elevate a passage such as Luke 10 and give it greater emphasis than other texts. In my estimation, some who advocate deliverance models give inordinate airtime to the theme of spiritual war and allow it to overly determine their view of the world and the Christian life. Reality can become primarily about a celestial war zone in which we participate, and that war zone is filled with demons. The name “spiritual warfare” itself even promotes this framework for thinking about the Christian life.

Does the Bible teach that spiritual war is the primary way we should understand the world? I will leave that for readers to ponder, but I would suggest that Scripture foregrounds other themes to frame the Christian life. The entire book of Hebrews, for example, locates the Christian life in the context of Israel’s wilderness wanderings. We are meant to envision a long journey such as described in the book *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In another example, 1 Peter speaks of the Christian life in terms of exile. We are to think of life in the context of suffering faithfully as sojourners in a foreign land. Neither of these visions of our spiritual reality (wilderness and exile) compete with the celestial war vision of the Christian life, but it is worth pausing to reflect on the different ways the Bible describes our reality. Is the daily Christian experience a celestial war, wilderness wandering, or exile? The answer is “yes!” I do not deny the reality of spiritual warfare, nor do I want to minimize it. But I do want to advise against allowing spiritual warfare to become the dominant theme we see in Scripture.

Evicting demons deserves attention, but I would argue it is a background issue in the Gospels and the entirety of the Bible.¹ If we see reality as mainly a celestial war, we will be pressured to make our practice reflect that reality. By highlighting the Bible’s vision of life as wilderness wandering and exile, I am shining the light around to illumine

1 Peter Bolt makes this point in the first chapter of *Living with the Underworld* (2007). He uses the terms “center” to refer to the main emphases of Scripture and “periphery” to refer to issues kept on the margins (demons).

a fuller picture of how the Bible describes the Christian life. We do not want to pass over the reality that our war is against spiritual authorities and powers (Eph. 6:12), but we also do not want to make it the primary thing we see. I am suggesting that since missionary practice reflects our theology, casting out demons might get overplayed if we view the Bible as being primarily about celestial warfare.

What sorts of missionary practices arise from the Christian life as wandering and exile, in addition to a war? Thankfully, Hebrews and 1 Peter are full of practical ways to love God and each other in light of these realities. These letters go to great length to detail Christian living in a hostile world, providing tools such as repentance, prayer, and witnessing by suffering faithfully.

Casting out demons is a tool to carry in the Christian tool bag, but perhaps it should not be our first impulse to wield it. For the sake of loving others, we do not want to apply the demon-casting tool when other spiritual remedies may be required. Now, in some situations it may be clear that demonic forces are present, and in these situations Derek's road map (part 6 of his article) is a helpful tool. But since casting out demons does not get center stage in the advance of the gospel in the New Testament, I am hesitant to read demon possession into the situation before me unless it is abundantly clear (i.e., the demon speaks, foams, or convulses, etc.). Since our perception of the situation before us is shaped by our view of ultimate reality, we all need God's help to see the totality of how Scripture portrays the world and our journey in it.

Listening to the Non-Secular Past: Let the Ancient Saints Speak

The final stop is about heeding the exhortation of Hebrews 11–12—we are aided by the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. In historical theology, we hear the voice of the church before secularism was ever a live option. Listening to those who have gone before us gets us out of

our interpretive echo chamber while simultaneously rejecting the notion that we are radically autonomous individuals who can skip two-thousand years of the gracious gift of God's church. Through the patristics, medievals, and reformers, we see a range of non-secularized Christian traditions. They are engaged in spiritual warfare in varied ways, many of which are quite different from the deliverance model.

The first ten books of Augustine's *City of God* spend considerable time polemically engaging the demons of Rome and describing how they are tearing Roman society apart. Augustine speaks in clear terms about how demon worship leads to war and upheaval. His approach is to combat the gods of Rome head-on by exposing their evil and proving the supremacy of Christ. Going back even further, the martyrdom account of Perpetua and Felicity (203 A.D.) provides graphic insight into the prayers and spirituality of early Christians facing certain death. Their fight against celestial and terrestrial authorities is easily within the bounds of what we now call "spiritual warfare." These dear sisters commit themselves to God and devote themselves to prayer. In these two historical Christian texts, we observe approaches to spiritual warfare which did not emphasize deliverance from demons by rather focused on other crucial ways that Christians engage in spiritual battle with the enemy.

Conclusion

As our scuba diving tour comes to an end, I do not expect us all to come up for air in the same place. I want us to see that we can be compassion-driven, Great-Commission focused, and Holy-Spirit led without arriving at the same conclusion as Derek. To lay my cards on the table, while we agree on much, Derek and I do not agree on spiritual warfare methodology. I personally have embraced variations of the classical and deliverance models over the years, and as I grow and continue to hold my convictions up against the Word of God, my practices change. Sometimes the differences are slight and other times they are not, but we must do the heavy lifting of reflecting upon what any practice is

asking of us. We must inquire, “What unspoken theological commitments are embedded in the complex web underneath this practice?” My hope and prayer is that as practitioners we grow in becoming theologically reflective. Let us have the patience and concentration to explore the complex web of theology and how it relates to missionary practices for the glory of God and the good of his church.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think of David M.’s response to “Evicting the Enemy: Rediscovering Spiritual Warfare in Church Planting”? What are the main concerns of his response article, and what is your evaluation of his assessment?
- How central should spiritual warfare be to our understanding of discipleship and church planting? What is the relative importance of “evicting” demons in the New Testament, and what should be its relative importance in your ministry?
- What has been your own personal journey with the different views on spiritual warfare? How does spiritual warfare manifest itself in your context?
- What role should Scripture, worldview, and personal experience each play in shaping our views of spiritual warfare? How does this play out for both Derek P. and David M.? How does it play out for you?

Bibliography

Beilby, James K., Paul R. Eddy, and Walter Wink, eds. 2012. *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Bolt, Peter. 2007. *Living with the Underworld*. Kingsford: Matthias Media.

Dahlfred, Karl. 2013. *Theology Drives Methodology: Conversion in the Theology of Charles Finney and John Nevin*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.

- Moreland, James Porter, and William Lane Craig. 2017. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- P., Derek. 2021. "Evicting the Enemy: Rediscovering Spiritual Warfare in Church Planting." *Seedbed* 22, no. 1 (May): 21–37.
- Quine, W. V., and J. S. Ullian. 1978. *The Web of Belief*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House.