

The Spiritual Nature of the Marketplace

Have you ever wondered why skeptics who claim they are “not religious” (and don’t want to talk about it) are happy to have their palms read or admit they consult the stars; while vocal opponents of churches and traditional Christianity adopt Zen as a lifestyle or overtly set up yoga classes in the workplace? Millions of people in the West claim they do not have any religion, but cults report they are growing faster than most church denominations. Why is this?

The answer is: the world around us is multi-dimensional. We are all familiar with 3-D, but there is a fourth, spiritual, dimension to life. We are both physical and spiritual beings. The marketplace is more than money, commodities, jobs, offices and factories. Society as we know it, the turmoils we see, including wars, political struggles, economic competition, racial conflicts, crime and family break-up all have an invisible spiritual dimension. The Bible teaches us that there are forces (or, rather, personalities) at work in the world that touch the whole human race. One is God; the other is Satan. Speaking to Christians in ancient Ephesus about the lives they lived before accepting Christ, the Apostle Paul said that they had, “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”, (Ephesians 2:2).

Everyone is a spiritual being

People are innately spiritual and (whether or not they recognize it) are involved in a life-long quest for enlightenment and fulfillment. Men and women without God are incomplete. Over the years I have worked with many highly educated and motivated men and women who have sought in alternative religions the meaning they craved but were convinced they could not identify in organized Christianity. Their contacts with Christians and churches left them with unanswered questions and a feeling conventional church life was not for them.

Each of us has a spiritual side. Not like creepy ghosts or disembodied spirits that are the stuff of movies, but created in the image of God, made to receive and reflect His life. We live because He lives. Kill God (the *God is Dead* movement tried) and we all remain dead spiritually (cf Ephesians 2:1, 5). There is part of us that only God can fill; if He is missing, emptiness remains. The human spirit is engaged in an endless search until it re-connects with the Maker. Like leaving the cord out of the computer and wondering why the screen remains black after the on/off switch is activated.

Spiritual fulfillment occurs through relationship with God who came to us as a Man, Jesus Christ. There is no higher goal, no deeper satisfaction, than knowing the presence of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. The number one contribution we Christians can make in our workplaces is to remain connected to Christ, so that our lives are energized by His life and others can see the evidence. In the words of a professional tradesman and part-time preacher who lived in the early Christian era, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

The spiritual dimension of the marketplace

There are spiritual forces at work in our world that want to claim every workplace, home, public service organization, policy think tank, educational institution and entertainment medium and bring the population under their influence and control. They are active across the spectrum of society. They impose their own truths. They seem to have power over peoples' lives, standards of living, paradigms and decisions. They gain "strongholds" in society. Such strongholds include faith systems, such as Islam, Hinduism and Daoism, with their attendant fears, superstitions, obligations and compulsions. They are evident in immoral lifestyles, such as entrenched prostitution, drug addiction, and racial prejudices. They work through extreme attitudes toward money, the manipulation and abuse of greed and wealth and the impoverishment of addictive gambling. They speak to us through powerful media interests and dominant political and societal systems, which re-construct truth ("spin") in their own image. In business they use corruption, unethical practices and power struggles to secure indomitable holds over peoples' lives.

Defining "strongholds"

What exactly is a "stronghold"? Let me describe one that I have visited.

Possibly the best preserved mediaeval fortress in existence is the Crusader castle, the Krak Des Chevaliers, located in modern Syria. This stronghold was never taken by storm. It incorporated the best military architecture of its time. Attacked repeatedly by Muslim armies in the late 12th century, it was strengthened and enlarged until it housed a garrison of 2000. From the outside the Krak is intimidating in its grandeur. It has concentric lines of defence, the inner ramparts lying close to the outer ones and dominating them. Its ramparts are 80 feet high and there are no footholds for enemies. The walls were built in such a way that defenders could easily drop rocks onto the attackers. They were thickened at the base so that sappers could not penetrate them. There are cliffs on three sides of the castle. The site did not fall until 1271, and that was the result of ruses that convinced the inhabitants to surrender without a fight, not because the castle was unable to withstand attackers.

Likewise, there are strongholds in peoples' thoughts, lives and work worlds; areas where Satan (from the Greek word meaning "enemy") and strong human will are dominant. They are like castles, shut up fast against all invaders, including truth. Those on the inside believe they are prevailing, not realizing that they are prisoners within the gates. The Bible teaches that the whole world (its cultural, monetary, military and political systems) lies under the sway of wickedness (1 John 5:19). Satan is the unseen ruler in the lives of billions. From the Fall of Adam and Eve, it was always this way, until the coming of Jesus.

Throughout the Bible, human empires are also described in spiritual terms. This does not mean they were not used by physical men and armies; it means, however, that there is a spiritual dimension to the exercise of hegemonic power. Warfare between ancient Israel and their enemies was often portrayed spiritually.

Jesus and the Devil – the titans clash

The Bible graphically depicts how Jesus and the Devil clashed during His earthly ministry. From the outset of Jesus' life, He went head-to-head with the strategies of Satan. Those strategies included numerous attempts to cut off Jesus' life and effectiveness, before He could do His work. Let's consider some examples.

When Jesus was still a baby the most powerful man in His country sent soldiers to kill him. While still an infant, he was taken to Egypt by his parents, to avoid Herod's assassination squads. He only narrowly escaped, when Joseph was warned in a dream to flee Israel. As He grew up, He was tempted in every area in which we all face temptation (Hebrew 4:15; 1 Corinthians 10:13). He had enemies who set out to kill him, and ultimately did so.

When Jesus was baptized He was led (more like "driven") by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he had major confrontations with Satan, who tried every trick in the book to divert Him from His course and lead him into sin. Yielding even once to temptation would have terminated His ministry. Jesus called the Devil "the enemy" (Matthew 13:19, 39) and said that he was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Jesus knew what Satan was like.

Part of the record of that period goes like this:

"The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"
(Luke 4:5-8 NIV)

Imagine being offered all of the kingdoms of the world. I have been to Bandar Seri Begawan, the elaborate capital of the country ruled by the super-rich Sultan of Brunei. But that is only one tiny pocket in Asia. Satan claimed ownership of everything, plus the power to bestow power and splendour. The price demanded of Jesus seemed relatively small. I have met people who have gone for the high stakes, compromised, played the game and paid this kind of price to achieve what they had. Note that Jesus did not challenge Satan in his assertions. He didn't respond by arguing that world authority did not rest in his hands. Ultimate authority is God's. We need to careful not to fall for the lie that authority over power and wealth reside in Satan's hands and that we have to go along with his and society's expectations to get anywhere. For Jesus, the key to victory lay in submission to God. "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'" (4:8; Deuteronomy 6:13).

On His return to Nazareth Jesus addressed a local synagogue, whereupon the people misunderstood the message and tried to lynch Him (Luke 4:14-30). On one level, the opposition was motivated by ignorance and prejudice. On another, it is clear that the devil aimed at making every possible effort to destroy Jesus.

Time and again, Jesus life and ministry were jeopardized by people and spiritual enemies who tried to curtail His existence and purpose. Satan even tried using the disciple Peter to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem to fulfill his mission (Matthew 16:23).

In facing down evil Jesus secured a victory that can be ours, as Christians. However, he also demonstrated the power and presence of evil in the world.

An important outcome of Jesus' ministry was defeating the power of Satan in peoples' lives (Acts 10:38; 1 John 3:8). He cast out demons (Matthew 8:16; 10:31) and set people free from Satanic domination manifested through sickness. As Jesus sat in his marketplace, watching crowds, animals and goods come and go, he saw beyond the merchandise and haggling, to the invisible, spiritual dimension. [Paul and Silas had a similar experience in the city of Philippi, where the Apostle discerned spiritual oppression in a young woman's life and decisively released her from demonic activity in Jesus' name (Acts 16 16-19).] It was Satan who put it into the hearts of Judas to betray Jesus (John 13:2).

Through His suffering, death and resurrection Jesus exhausted the power of evil. Hounded implacably to the cross, a place that seemed to spell the end of His mission, He defeated Satan there (Colossians 2:15). When He rose again all power was given to Him (Matthew 18:18). However, he did not say that evil forces had ceased to influence human affairs. They had merely changed strategies, even though notionally overthrown.

God retains ultimate authority and sovereignty over His creation. At a local level, Jesus called Satan the Prince of this World (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Elsewhere, the New Testament calls him the God of this World (2 Corinthians 4:4) and "The Prince of the Power of the Air" (Ephesians 2:2). The battle he wages is not about flesh and blood, but for peoples' hearts and minds. He makes power seem enticing and achievable. He seeks to gain authority and control over people. That authority is secured when it is permitted, as is clear from the story of Job (Job 1:6-2:10). Satan uses fears as well as enticements. He comes as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

The Bible says that Satan wanders about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). It proclaims that we, as Christians, are more than conquerors through Christ (Romans 8:37); the Greek word implies "invincible". All too often we think that our struggles are with people. Not so. Our real struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual enemies; we need spiritual weapons (Ephesians 6:12). The Bible states that,

"... though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NIV)

What about our marketplaces?

What does all this have to do with your marketplace, or mine? Precisely this: if the world in which we live is still under the influence of Satan, that reality applies to our workplaces. Demonic beings still take control over peoples' lives. The world's economic and political systems remain at loggerheads with God's Kingdom (the place where God is King and "principalities" opposed to Him are disempowered, cf Matthew 12:28). Many sections of the marketplace are "behind enemy lines", so to speak. In the clinical West, the activity of Satan is usually invisible and is dismissed by skeptics. In lots of countries I have visited, particularly in the so-called the Third World, it is highly visible, as in New Testament days. Only the power of God can defeat him.

Every member of the human race, every nation, every business enterprise, owes allegiance to a higher power, whether God or the Devil. Every element of the marketplace that is not under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is under the lordship of the Devil. This is the reason fine intellect alone will not win the battle for the marketplace, where spiritual strongholds have to be broken down, blind eyes have to be opened, seared consciences have to be renewed and the authority of Jesus Christ has to be acknowledged before true freedom comes.

When we become Christians we change spiritual allegiances. The act of following Christ results in a "transference" from what the Bible calls the Kingdom of this World, ruled by the "god of this world" to the Kingdom of God. The Bible teaches that the "God of this world" blinds the eyes of non-Christians, to prevent the light of the Gospel of Christ from getting through to them" (2 Corinthians 4:4). After deciding to follow Christ, we switch sides and find we have a new spiritual enemy.

We need to be careful how we live. The moment we yield small areas of our lives (our thoughts, words, priorities, attitudes, reactions and decisions) to Satan's ways, we permit unbelief, negativity and deception to enter and assert control. Paul encourages us not to let Satan gain a "foothold" (Ephesians 4:27). The word here reminds us of the danger of "giving ground" to an invading enemy. Power, wealth and positions can be terribly seductive and can prove stumbling blocks to any Christian.

I am not pessimistic. Satan does not have any power unless it is permitted by God, for a purpose. As Christians, we have access to the authority of Jesus' name and are promised victory over our spiritual enemies. It is, as David declared, just as if God is preparing a table for our benefit, to provide for us, right in the midst of our enemies, showing that He is in total control (Psalm 23:5).

Nor am I suggesting that we withdraw from the world's systems, as though interacting with them will cause us to stumble. We cannot simply withdraw. I am saying that we need to be aware of what is going on and ensure our driving force is God. Over many centuries people who have withdrawn into caves, monasteries and exclusive churches have discovered, to their chagrin, that the power of evil is everywhere, including in their midst, and that it is not seclusion, but daily surrender to Christ, that makes and keeps us free.

Strategies and responses

How can we know what is occurring behind the scenes, and protect ourselves, while influencing the marketplace for Christ?

1. Be aware and discerning

We need spiritual discernment to know what is going on. When Paul met a man named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of a Roman proconsul in Cyprus named Sergius Paulus he quickly discerned that he was a sorcerer and false prophet and publicly denounced the man's evil ways (Acts 13:6-12). It was the Holy Spirit who enabled him to see that Bar-Jesus' opposition to his preaching lay in spiritual forces motivating and energizing him. Later on, Paul emphasized this point when he wrote to the church at Corinth saying that his preaching was not based on human wisdom, but an exercise of supernatural power (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Only Christians have the capacity to discern spiritual strongholds from God's perspective. I once read a commentary on Ephesians that stated, "We no longer fear demons in the stars". The writer was explaining that belief in the supernatural world was obsolete among liberal Christians. It is, however, one of the fundamentals of Biblical Christianity. The Holy Spirit can raise our awareness and enable us to tune in to the spiritual world around us. We believe that Jesus conquered Satan and gives us the power to resist the devil, so that he will flee from us (James 4:7).

2. Love people

Regardless of what people got involved in, Jesus loved them. From my perspective, there is too much harshness and lovelessness in sectors of denominational Christianity. Jesus had compassion on all who came to him, even if they initially hated him. He forgave his persecutors and prayed for them from the cross. He said His truth was able to set them free (John 8:32).

We must be established in grace, even if we become morally outraged at elements of human behaviour, and their consequences in human experience. This means loving cranky neighbours, homosexuals, tyrants, Muslim fundamentalists, hypocrites and those who target us and our way of life, in the same way, without any reservations, as Jesus did. The Bible teaches that the world as we know it will pass away. God loves those in our marketplace; he can set them free, change their hearts, give them a new beginning and make them our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Instead of being judgmental and legalistic, let's try the love of God the Father who sent Jesus to save us. We may not feel we have much time - work life is usually rushed - but every seed has the capacity to grow and change lives. That may or may not make an immediate difference; however it is better than denying hope to people for whom Jesus died. Love can result in colleagues being set

free from spiritual deception and slavery. Spiritually alive Christians should be contagious.

3. *Proclaim Christ*

We are called to proclaim Christ. Paul said that he was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, because it was the power of God to save people (Romans 1:16). He may have been ashamed at the actions of some of his fellow-Christians (including fellow-preachers), or his own weaknesses, but never the message. It is our privilege to share Christ with people in our marketplace. The Truth of who Jesus is will break down strongholds and see people set free.

4. *Live out your victory each day*

Christ has set us free, from the power and guilt of sin. He has delivered us from the Devil's Kingdom. His power and victory are ours (1 John 5:1-5). His presence is with us, and in us, when we enter our marketplaces every day. In the midst of those marketplaces, we can live above the chaos, emptiness and despair. We need to stand fast in the freedom we enjoy in Him (Galatians 5:1).

If we are living in our victory, we can be passionate about our work, reflect our relationship with God and come across as "normal" in a culture that feels spiritual failure. After all, there is no reason to separate the part of us that loves God and the part of us that physically operates in the marketplace. Integrated faith and work are made possible because this is precisely what Jesus Christ did. He is our model, as well as our strength.