

Spiritual Warfare and Church Growth

By Chuck Lawless

Have you ever found growing a church to be difficult? Does it sometimes seem like you're fighting against forces that were stronger than you? Have there been days when you wanted to give up? Maybe you are facing the reality of spiritual warfare in your attempts to be a church growth leader.

Spiritual warfare has become a hot topic in the last few years. More than 100 books on the subject have been published since 1990. Conferences around the country are well-attended. Regrettably, much of the teaching about spiritual warfare lacks a biblical base, and we should be careful to filter everything through the scriptures.

Nevertheless, the Bible does say something about the warfare we face as we lead churches to growth. Future articles will address more specifics about spiritual warfare, but we will start with three basic warfare issues that all churches face.

First, *we are trying to reach lost people who are blinded*. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers that unbelievers are "blinded by the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:3-4). The "god of this age" is Satan, who is also called the "prince of this world" (John 16:11) and the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Nonbelievers are held under his dominion (Acts 26:18) in the "domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13).

What does this reality mean for us as we try to reach lost people? Obviously, we don't have the power in ourselves to reach people blinded by the enemy. Nothing we can do in our own strength is sufficient to open blinded minds. The enemy will do everything he can do to keep nonbelievers in his darkness.

For this reason, evangelism must be accompanied with *prayer*. Evangelism is the task, but prayer is the power behind the task. If only God can open minded blinds, doesn't it make sense to seek His guidance and intervention as we evangelize lost people?

As you train church members to evangelize, are you also training them to pray? Have you trained your church to be intercessors? When you send members out to do evangelism, is there a prayer team supporting them in prayer? If not, you may be sending them into a spiritual battle unarmed. The result is too often a defeated church member who loses the passion to do evangelism.

Second, *undisciplined believers are targets for the enemy*. Maybe your story is like mine. I became a believer as a teenager, but nobody taught me to be a disciple of Christ. My church told me what I needed to do (like read the Bible, pray, and witness), but they didn't show me how. Nobody told me how to walk in truth, righteousness, and faith (see Eph. 6:11-17). As a result, I lived a defeated Christian life for far too many years.

The enemy aims his arrows at young believers who haven't been disciplined. He strikes them with doubt and discouragement. Sometimes he hits them with loneliness, as they move away from their non-Christian friends and try to fit into a church that is unfamiliar to them. At other times, he lures them with the same temptations they faced as non-believers. Whatever his strategy may be, he wants to strike at new believers before they get solidly planted in the church.

Our response to Satan's strategy is simple: intentionally disciple new believers. Enlist a group of faithful church members, and train them to be disciplers. Assign a trained mentor to each new believer. Develop a strategy for leading a new believer toward maturity in Christ, and use the trained mentors to guide converts through the

process. In the spiritual battles we face, discipleship may mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Third, *we cannot overcome the enemy apart from God's Word*. Do you remember Jesus' own battle with the devil in the wilderness? Three times, the devil tempted Him, and three times He responded by quoting God's Word (Matt. 4:1-11). The simple phrase, "It is written" was enough to cause Satan ultimately to back down from the battle.

In each of our Billy Graham School studies of evangelistically growing churches, preaching the Word has been a primary factor in the churches' effectiveness in evangelism and assimilation. That finding shouldn't surprise us, though. The Word is alive and powerful (Heb. 4:12), converting the soul (Psa. 19:7) and protecting us from sin (Psa. 119:11). Even Satan is no match for the Word of God.

If you want to grow a church that overcomes the enemy, preach the Word. As you do so, evangelize and pray. Then disciple new believers toward maturity in Christ. In essence, *be the New Testament church*—and you'll experience victory in spiritual battles.