

Spiritual Warfare and Church Planting

By Chuck Lawless

Consider these scenarios from the world of church planting:

Scenario #1—God has called you to plant a church, and you have tried to be obedient in every way. The sacrifice has been heavy, but God has been good to you. Believers around the country are praying for you. On the outside, everything looks good. But on the inside, temptations are tearing you up. The secret battle is so great that you wonder if you will ever find victory. You are always on the verge of *messing up* so badly that your very ministry is at stake.

Scenario #2—Greg, a non-believer, seems to be completely closed to the gospel. No matter how much you share with him, he has no interest in following Christ. The Bible means little to him. The arguments about Christ carry no weight for him. You have given your best efforts, but nothing changes.

At the same time, you have members in your church, like Kathy, who once were “on fire for God,” but that fire has been extinguished. They were valuable team members who were willing to give or do anything to help the church plant, but their excitement is now gone. In fact, they are now creating disunity in the church.

In addition, your own family is facing unexpected health issues. It seems like you never get a break. With non-believers unresponsive, believers now uncommitted, and your family struggling, you are close to *giving up*.

Scenario #3—Unlike others you know, your work has been effective. God has blessed the church plant, and you look forward every week to meeting with your team. In fact, other church planters are coming to you for advice. “*Maybe I’ll even write a book someday,*” you

think to yourself. You do not realize it yet, but you are now dangerously close to *getting* “*puffed up.*”

What might seem to be decidedly different scenarios are actually quite similar in that each reflects a common attack of the enemy on church planters. Satan wants church planters (and all church leaders) to *mess up, give up, or get puffed up.*

Satan Opposes Followers of Christ

While demons cannot possess genuine believers, Scripture affirms that Satan continues to attack those who follow Christ. For example, Jesus warned Peter that Satan demanded permission to “sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31). Peter himself later warned believers, “Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NASB). The missionary/church planter Paul, who himself experienced “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” (2 Cor. 12:7), admonished believers to “put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). James, too, called believers to resist the devil, presupposing that the enemy would attack (Jas. 4:7). If Satan does not attack believers, such recurrent warnings would seem irrelevant and unnecessary.

Needless to say, Satan particularly aims his arrows at those who seek to do the work of the Great Commission. A primary task for all believers is to evangelize unbelievers who are under Satan’s dominion (Acts 26:18) in the “domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13). The non-believers we are trying to reach are “blinded by the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:3-4), also called the “prince of this world” (John 16:11) and the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2). The unbeliever is by no means guiltless, but the darkness is deepened by the enemy’s efforts to maintain control. Hence, church planters who seek to reach non-believers, bring them to maturity, and lead them to be part of a healthy congregation are invading Satan’s kingdom. We should not be surprised when he counterattacks.

Though the enemy’s schemes against believers are many, some are obvious. Satan entices believers with temptation, seeking to lure us into patterns of our former walk (Eph 4:17-32).

Bondage results, and “messing up” becomes a lifestyle, even though it may be hidden from others. Church planters—whose very position sometimes places them in ministry isolation—may be especially vulnerable here.

After influencing believers to sin, the enemy then heaps accusations on us; the tempter quickly becomes the accuser (Rev. 12:10). We sin, and guilt is compounded by the enemy’s accusations. We then believe his accusations, and we lose our will to fight the next temptation. His strategy to “beat up on sinners” often leads to a cycle of defeat and discouragement. Messing up soon becomes giving up.

Moreover, Satan endeavors to cultivate strife among believers, thereby weakening the church’s united witness (John 17:20-21). The challenge of the Great Commission is so immense that Christians must work together to accomplish our task. The enemy, however, will do all he can to sow seeds of discord among believers. The church planter who has given his all to the work—only to see that work sometimes diminished by fellow believers who strive for power and fight for position—finds himself defeated and discouraged.

Arrogance is perhaps the most subtle of Satan’s attacks on church leaders. Few leaders readily admit arrogance; indeed, some whose pride is most glaring to others seem to be the most oblivious to their sin. New converts who too soon are given leadership positions are particularly susceptible to this sin (1 Tim. 3:6). Some church planters likewise reveal this same wrong thinking with attitudes such as “no traditional church does it right,” “large churches are usually shallow churches,” or “only my model of a healthy church is the right one.”

Here, then, is the challenge for church planters—to be faithful even when spiritual attacks are imminent. One option, of course, is to lead in such a way that the church plant is not a threat to Satan. Do not get concerned if the new congregation is not reaching non-believers and disciples are not being made. Allow ministry work to divert away from a focus on seeing new believers baptized. Be complacent about a strategic plan for making disciples. Read the Word only when necessary, and pray even less. In the end, Satan will not be

alarmed. The demons will say of this ministry, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know. But who are you?” (Acts 19:15, NKJV).

The other option is the more difficult one: threaten the enemy by your undying commitment to the Great Commission. Walk with God humbly, knowing that Satan’s traps that lure toward arrogance are subtle indeed. Share the gospel, and make disciples with such consistency that the demons themselves come roaring back. Recognize that spiritual warfare is strongest against those whose Great Commission passion puts a bull’s eye on their back for the enemy. In that sense, church planters who face attack may be assured that their ministry alarms the enemy enough to elicit his assault. That simple truth should bring excitement more than alarm.

A Proposal

Victory in spiritual warfare is never as easy as simply verbally rebuking the devil and watching him flee. That proposed response lacks biblical support and is overly simplistic. Church planters who seek daily victory in Christ might instead consider the following guidelines:

Recognize spiritual warfare, but focus on God.

Church planters must recognize spiritual warfare while also marching into battle with their eyes on God instead of the enemy. God is the divine warrior who led His people across the Red Sea (Ex. 15:3). David fought the Philistine giant not with a sword and a javelin, but in the name of the Lord whose battle it was (1 Sam. 17:45-47). Jehaziel likewise assured Jehoshaphat of God’s presence in the midst of battle with these words: “Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s” (2 Chron. 20:15, NASB).

God is our shield (Gen. 15:1, Ps. 28:7), and it is He who chose to wear the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation (Isa. 59:17). We face a real enemy in spiritual battles, but we are armed in the armor of a God who is “greater than he who is in the

world” (1 John 4:4). Hence, the church planters who are most equipped for spiritual warfare are those who have learned foremost to keep their eyes on Him.

Of great importance is this truth: the same God who first calls the church planter to this task is still God when life gets difficult. Concerns such as health issues, family worries, congregational conflict, and financial hardship can be consuming if we forget that God is bigger than anything we face. The enemy wants us to focus on our troubles, but victory comes by keeping our attention on God.

Consistently study the Word.

One would wish that this expectation would be a given for a church planter, but such is not always the case. The challenges of enlisting a ministry team, raising financial support, securing a place to meet, and beginning a fresh ministry sometimes consume time previously committed to studying the Word. The enemy is delighted when the good work of ministry distracts from the imperative work of Bible study.

This basic instruction serves as a reminder that the Word of God is alive and powerful (Heb. 4:12), converting the soul (Ps. 19:7), and protecting us from sin (Ps. 119:11). The simple phrase, “It is written” was enough to cause Satan ultimately to back down from the battle when he attacked Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11), and the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17) remains today a vital weapon against the enemy.

Do not accept the enemy’s lies that personal Bible study really does not matter. No church planter can experience genuine spiritual victory without a consistent, personal time with God.

Seek prayer support.

Paul concluded the book of Ephesians with a request for believers to pray for one another and for his evangelistic endeavors (Eph. 6:18-20). Though Paul likely did not intend prayer to be a piece of the armor of God, the sense of urgency noted in verses 18-20 ties his request

to the battle indicated in 6:11-12. The believers were to “be on the alert,” praying with *all* prayer at *all* times with *all* perseverance and petition for *all* the saints (v. 18).

Seek prayer for an open door to share the gospel (Col. 4:2-3). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul requested the believers to pray, “God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3, NIV). Because he was in prison at the time (Col. 4:18), it is possible that Paul desired a release from prison in order to preach the gospel. More likely, though, Paul was simply requesting God to provide an opportunity for sharing the gospel within his present circumstances.

Seek prayer support for your witness (Col. 4:3-4; Eph. 6:19-20). Not only did Paul request prayer for an open door, but he also sought prayer for himself as the messenger. Specifically, he asked for prayer that he might proclaim the gospel clearly and boldly (Col. 4:4, Eph. 6:19-20). The open door would not be enough if there were no messenger willing to proclaim the Word, and Paul understood that he had no ability to speak that Word apart from God’s power.

If Paul needed that level of prayer support, surely contemporary church planters do as well. Seek prayer warriors who pray proactively for you every day rather than waiting to pray for you only after the enemy attacks.

Seek holiness and accountability.

Spiritual attacks (particularly those related to temptation) are often most potent when we are alone, tired, and discouraged—descriptors that are appropriate for too many church planters. Serving without a support team, some planters find themselves isolated and lonely. Church planting tasks are so numerous and difficult that fatigue is common. As noted earlier in this chapter, discouragement at some point is almost assumed. Temptation strikes, and the weakened church planter succumbs.

One means to battle temptation is to seek accountability. It may be difficult to find in the Bible specific examples of one-to-one accountability as we understand it today, but several

verses suggest accountability among believers. For example, Jesus sent out His messengers, expected a report from them, and corrected them when they missed the point of their ministry (Luke 10:1-20). He also taught church discipline that assumed accountability (Matt. 18:15-20). Paul demanded that the Corinthian church deal with sin in their midst rather than overlook it in arrogance (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The Thessalonians were to “admonish as a brother” those that did not obey Paul’s instructions (2 Thess. 3:14-15). James instructed believers to confess their sins to one another (James 5:16).

The early church understood themselves as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27), committed to God and to each other. They provoked one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24), believing they were responsible for helping fellow Christians grow in their faith. Each of us, especially those on the frontlines of growing healthy churches, bears that same responsibility to push one another toward holiness. If you desire to live a righteous life that defeats the enemy, seek an accountability partner who gives you that push and consider joining or starting a church planter network.

Teach and model healthy relationships.

The enemy’s attacks on relationships are noted early in Scripture. His presence in the Garden of Eden quickly led to Adam’s placing the blame for his sin on the wife that God had graciously given to him (Gen. 3:9-12). Some time thereafter, a brother killed his own brother as sin disrupted relationship after relationship (Gen. 4:1-8). That pattern has not changed—the enemy still aims his arrows at relationships.

Satan knows that destroyed relationships most often result in ended ministries. In that light, perhaps the words of this church planter’s wife hit close to home: “The stress and pressure of starting a church is so overwhelming. There are thousands of things to do before your launch date. Unfortunately, unless we’re careful, our marriages will get pushed to the side. As church planting couples, we’re busy and stressed out. The trouble usually starts with little arguments, where we bicker over stupid things. Then the bickering grows and festers and soon it’s like World War III has begun. Resentment builds, and we feel like we’re dying inside. We feel alone and sad.”¹

If these words sound familiar, take heart in the conclusion from this same spouse: “I’m happy to tell you that it doesn’t have to be like this. We can have healthy marriages and relationships with our families while going through a church plant.”²

However, such godly marriages do not happen naturally or easily. Unless church planters work diligently at prioritizing their families, praying with their spouses, and setting aside time with their children, the enemy will all too often create conflict and division in the home.

Take time now to ask God to create in your family the unity for which He prayed for the church (John 17:21). Then, teach relationship principles and skills to your congregation so that they, too, can stand against the enemy.

Wear the full armor of God.

The enemy aims his arrows at young believers who have not been discipled. 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 by teaching them to wear the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17). Unless believers are taught to walk in truth, righteousness, and faith, we will always remain susceptible to the enemy’s arrows. In the spiritual battles that all believers face, discipleship may mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Regrettably, some church leaders—including church planters—have themselves not truly been discipled. Such leaders operate in their own strength, depending more on ability, skill, and experience than on the power of God. Seldom do we admit this reality though for fear that we will lose our credibility as a leader. If this description fits you, choose now not to

live under the enemy's deception. Be honest with someone, and seek a mentor who will begin helping you to wear the full armor of God. Consider joining or starting a network of leaders to focus on personal growth and development.

Conclusion

I doubt I have presented anything revolutionary here, and that is the point. If you want to plant and grow a church that overcomes the enemy, evaluate your own life first. Make certain that you are wearing the armor of God. Look for a mentor to help you walk in Christ. Love the Word, live it, and preach it. Seek consistent prayer support. Evangelize non-believers, and disciple new believers. In the midst of busyness, always guard your relationship with your family.

Be ever alert to the enemy's strategies to lead you to mess up, give up, or get puffed up. In essence, *be a New Testament believer as you plant a New Testament church*, and you will experience victory in spiritual battles.

Material to be used in the margin: If you do not have a strategy to read the Word, seek input from a trusted believer, mentor, fellow planter, or denominational leader. Consider following a Bible reading plan like those found at www.crosswalk.com.

*Sections of this chapter have been previously published in Chuck Lawless, *Putting on the Armor* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2007); Lawless, "Spiritual Warfare and Missions," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Winter 2005): 34-48; Lawless, "Spiritual Warfare," *The Complete Evangelism Guidebook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 104-107.

¹ Church Planting Wives blog, accessed at <http://www.planterwives.com/2008/04/session-on-marriage-part-2.html>.

² *Ibid.*

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