

Critical Issues Commentary

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The Dishonoring of God in Popular Spiritual Warfare

Teaching
by Bob DeWaay

"The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all." (Psalm 103:19)

"[A]nd He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26).

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." (Romans 13:1)

Many popular teachers question God's sovereign rule over His own creation. Their unbiblical scenario goes like this: God made Adam the ruler of the world; Adam committed "treason" and turned the rightful dominion of the earth over to Satan; and Christ's atonement was to regain this lost dominion. According to this theology, however, Christ turned the rulership of the world over to the church when He ascended into heaven. The church consequently lost it back to Satan by ignorance, unbelief, and dis-unity. Now in these last days supposed prophets and apostles are being raised up to take control over the Satanic forces in the heavenlies and Christianize the world. This happens as the church takes cities through binding and casting down the spiritual forces of darkness that rule over them. Many dominion spiritual warfare teachers embrace this scheme, though differing on some details.

The "dominion" scenario and its underlying theological premises are unbiblical. We shall consider the various claims of this teaching point by point and compare them with the teachings of the Bible. Quotations of popular teachers who espouse various new spiritual warfare

teachings will be given to show how widespread these ideas have become.

Adam Gave World Rulership to Satan?

Dominion theology starts with this premise: Adam was not merely given dominion over the non-human creation, but over the whole world, spiritually and potentially politically. Some go so far as to claim Adam was "god" over the earth. For example, Kenneth Copeland teaches:

God's reason for creating Adam was His desire to reproduce Himself. I mean a reproduction of Himself. . . He [Adam] was not a little like God, He was not almost like God, He was not subordinate to God even. Now this is hard on the human mind, but I am telling you what the Bible said.¹

Copeland goes on to teach that Adam had complete dominion over the earth. Earl Paulk has a different version of this: "The only place under God's dominion at the time was the Garden, given to Adam and Eve. Spirits still controlled the earth, but God told Adam and Eve to subdue them"² A consistent theme of the dominion spiritual warfare theology is that God's sphere of rulership is limited. It is as if delegating authority is the same as losing it.

The next step in the development of this teaching is the transfer of Adam's authority to Satan. Ed Silvano writes, "Because Adam, God's deputy on earth, transferred his legal dominion to Satan, God became obligated to recognize Satan's legal standing in spite of the fraudulent way in which it was obtained."³ Kenneth Copeland described the situation after Adam, "committed high treason, used that authority and delivered it into the hands of an alien spirit." The result was, "Now God literally was on the outside looking in."⁴ Copeland reiterates this point, "After Adam had given it away, God didn't have any more authority here."⁵ The earth, its inhabitants, and even the spirit beings therein were outside of God's realm of authority, according to this popular teaching. Satan had supposedly obtained the legal authority over the earth from

Adam, and God had to recognize Satan's authority.

If this were true, clearly the Biblical writers were unaware of it. The Old Testament asserts God's universal authority over all things — that includes Satan. For example, in Job, Satan had to ask God permission to touch Job (**Job 1:6-12**). The Psalmist describes God's authority: "*God reigns over the nations, God sits on His holy throne. The princes of the people have assembled themselves as the people of the God of Abraham; For the shields of the earth belong to God; He is highly exalted*" (**Psalm 47:8,9**). Even when the wicked are devising evil and carrying it out, they are unwittingly furthering God's purposes as Joseph told his brothers: "*And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive*" (**Genesis 50:20**). Even the crucifixion of our Lord, though carried out by evil men, was God's "predetermined plan" (**Acts 2:23,24**).

The Bible hardly presents God as lacking legal authority over His own creation. Abraham called God, "the Judge of all the Earth." (**Genesis 18:25**). In **Ezekiel 18:4a** God said, "*Behold, all souls are Mine.*" Nevertheless, many popular teachers assert that God lost his dominion over the Earth to Satan. In **Acts 17:26**, Paul taught that God determined the "boundaries" of all nations which is a reiteration of **Deuteronomy 32:8**. God even used pagan kings, like Cyrus of Persian, to do His bidding and glorify Him (see **Isaiah 45:16**). It is inconceivable that God could determine the boundaries of nations if He were lacking legal authority over the earth.

Another powerful counter-example to this theory is Jonah and Ninevah. No one cast down the principalities and powers over Ninevah. This city was exceedingly wicked, known for her oppression and violence. Jonah did not even want Ninevah to repent (**Jonah 4:2**). That the whole city repented cannot be attributed to any human spiritual warfare strategy. The Jews were hardly praying for the conversion of Ninevah. The conversion of Ninevah was God's doing, with human help coming only through a man who wanted nothing to do with it.

The Ransom Theory of the Atonement

The next error of the dominionist

spiritual warfare revision of Biblical teaching is their change in the purpose of the atonement. Christ died, they reason, so God could get back from Satan what Adam had transferred to him. Historically, this is known as the ransom theory of the atonement. This theory was proposed early in church history, but lost out to the more Biblical teaching of the substitutionary atonement. The following is a summary of the ransom theory:

In this situation God offered Christ to the evil one as a ransom in exchange for sinners. Satan eagerly accepted the offer realizing that he was getting far more than he was giving up, but when he got Christ down into hell he found that he could not hold him. On the third day Christ rose triumphant and Satan was left with neither his original prisoners nor the ransom price.⁶

It is common for popular “faith” teachers to embellish this theory with dramatic accounts of Christ fighting it out with Satan in hell, some even claiming that Christ did so as a mere man, having lost his divinity.⁷

The ransom theory is connected to dominion spiritual warfare teaching in its supposed explanation of how God managed to reclaim legal authority over the earth and mankind. For example, Ed Silvano offers this explanation: “Before Jesus’ victory at Calvary, God would not become a trespasser by challenging Satan directly in matters related to man and the world under his control. If he did so Satan could have called God a trespasser.”⁸ He goes on to explain that sending Jesus was the only way to “legally” recover the government of the earth.

This theory dishonors God. It assumes that God has to pay a debt to Satan to get back His own creation. What is blatantly ignored by this theory is the fact that **man owed a debt of sin to God and was rightfully under His wrath!** We were under the curse of the law **Galatians 3** and facing eternal condemnation. The Bible uses the term “propitiation,” as in **Romans 3:25**: “whom [Christ] God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.” The Greek word for “propitiation” in its noun form is also used in the New Testament for “mercy seat.” The blood of the sacrifice was poured out on the mercy seat to appease God’s wrath against sin. The

atonement is about our being saved from God’s wrath, not about God being saved from Satan’s supposed legal right over God’s own creation. “*Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*” (**Romans 5:9**).

It is true that deliverance from Satan is a result of the atonement. But this result is based on delivering us from our guilt under the law, which held us in bondage to sin and Satan (**Colossians 2:13-15**). That idea is not the same as God paying a ransom price to Satan. The blood of Jesus is Biblical terminology for His laid down life. Blood was literally shed on Calvary when Jesus died for our sins. This blood was shed “once for all” as the Bible teaches in many places. It is not a metaphysical entity that can be invoked against Satan and demons. It is the price paid to God for our sins. Spiritual warfare teachers are regularly confused about this. For example: “[T]he number-one thing the devil cannot do is to penetrate the blood of Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus has already broken the power of the devil and it is a force, a power, an entity in this universe available to every child of God for deliverance and salvation from every situation, circumstance or sin.”⁹ This makes the blood of Christ out to be a metaphysical entity that has magical powers against demons, like an amulet, rather than the price that was paid to God for our sins.

So Why are There Still Problems?

Having taught that Christ regained God’s legal right to his own creation, spiritual warfare teachers go on to explain why the world is still in a mess. The problem is with the church. According to their theories, Christ gained victory, and sits far above all principalities and powers (**Ephesians 1:20-22**), which is true. Christ has all authority. However, they claim that control over the heavenlies has to be gained by the church. Christ’s exalted status will do no good if the church, to whom He has delegated His authority (remember that they assume delegated authority means lost or transferred authority), fumbles the ball. Alas, what happened with Adam potentially can happen again.

This problem is explained in a number of ways by various teachers. Ed Silvano teaches: “The Church has now been placed *potentially* in control of the heavenly places once ruled by the prince of

the power of the air. But the church must engage and defeat the enemy to retake the heavenlies in the name of her Lord, so that the eyes of those still being held captive by Satan will be opened.”¹⁰ Of course the church lived in ignorance for nearly two thousand years until modern spiritual warfare teachers came along to teach us. The preaching of the gospel, faith toward God, and regeneration of the Holy Spirit supposedly is thwarted until the church “controls” the heavenlies.

The church was never commissioned to control the heavenlies. Consider this: Jesus told Peter that Satan had demanded from God “permission” to sift Peter like wheat (**Luke 22:31**). God, in His sovereign oversight of the universe, gave it to Satan, but it only led to Peter’s conversion and subsequent ministry. Once we are in charge of the heavenlies will Satan have to ask us rather than God for such permission? Does the church have sufficient knowledge, wisdom, and power to rule a realm of being that is only partially described in the Bible and to rule this realm for everyone’s good? I think not — the church is not designed and equipped to do so. God is in charge of the heavenlies. Whatever God’s providence allows Satan and his evil cohorts to do will only lead to the benefit of God’s people and the glory of God’s immutable purposes (see **Romans 8:28-39**). Christ authorized the church to “make disciples,” not take control over the heavenlies.

Many spiritual warfare teachers twist the scriptures to make it appear that we are to rule the earth and the heavenlies. They quote the following passage: “*And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.*” (**Ephesians 1:22,23**). The assumption is that he gave the church as head over all things — that as His body we are to exercise authority over “all things.” However, the passage does not state that He gave “headship over all things to the church,” but that He gave “Him as head over all things to the church”! There is a huge difference. We have received Christ, not headship. Christ rules and Satan still has to ask permission as in Peter’s situation. Our security is in Christ and His benevolent rule over His own creation, not in our supposed rule in His stead.

Dominion spiritual warfare teachers think God is at the mercy of the church. They teach a “vulnerable” God, severely limited in His oversight of His own

creation. For example, Silviso teaches that the church has the power to turn the earth and the heavenly places over to Satan. He writes: "Satan's only option is to try to deceive the Church, God's agent on earth, into yielding to him what has been entrusted to her care by God, much like what he did to Eve, and then to Adam, in the garden."¹¹ He consistently repeats the theme that the church is in the position to give jurisdiction over the heavenlies and thereby the destiny of the cities of the earth to Satan. God could supposedly be back in the same sorry state that these teachers claim He was in the Old Testament.

We ought not to consider God vulnerable and limited even in the context of our God-given responsibility to preach the Gospel. Yet Silviso writes, "[P]rayer operates in the realm of God's self-imposed limitations. These are areas where God, for reasons unknown to us, chose to limit His options and, consequently, His freedom of action."¹² Another spiritual warfare author says, "How vulnerable God has made Himself to us!"¹³ Christ will build His church. God chooses people out of the mass of perdition and sends them forth with His saving message. Never does God call us to be cosmic rulers or masters of a universe from which He has backed off and left us or else the devil to take charge.

To show that I am not over-stating their claims, consider this statement by Francis Frangipane who claims to have sold hundreds of thousands of spiritual warfare books:

The church that successfully wars against Jezebel will be a church that inherits the glorious "morning star," which will be visible outward glory, a symbol of hidden, inward purity. It will be a church that exercises "authority over the nations," uniquely because it has conquered the Jezebel spirit which sought to strip God's servants of authority.¹⁴

He supposes that the Jezebel in **Revelation 2:20** is a spirit being that is currently controlling much of society and the church. Jezebel's principle enemies are modern prophets who are "Elijah" coming in spirit before the coming of the Lord. He states, "Seeing Jezebel so blatantly manifest herself only confirms that the spirit of Elijah is also here bringing repentance and raising up warring prophets throughout our land!"¹⁵ In keeping with common dominionist spiritual warfare claims, this assumes that the church throughout

history allowed itself and the rest of society to be ruled by Satan's agents, but that now new prophets with new revelations are going to bring us into world dominion.

The Power of Words and Unity?

Having decided that the church has the role of ruling the heavenlies in Christ's stead, the dominionist spiritual warfare teachers assert several theories about how it is determined whether we or Satan get the upper hand. One key principle is the supposed power of words. Frangipane writes, "Christ, as the **High Priest of our Confession** (Heb. 3:1), takes our words, whether in faith or unbelief, and allocates back to us eternal life in proportion to our words."¹⁶ It is assumed in this teaching that Christ's priesthood is limited to our words. This improper and inadequate Biblical exegesis makes a huge mistake in taking the term "confession" as limiting Christ's priesthood to our words. We confess **Christ as our high priest** is the author's meaning. Frangipane's misinterpretation exalts our own words at Christ's expense. Larry Lea also emphasizes the power of words: "The devil cannot know all your thoughts. But he can know what you say. Your words can give him the entry he needs to work evil."¹⁷

This is common theme in the dominionist, spiritual warfare camp. Ed Silviso teaches that we create "jurisdiction" for Satan by anger, unforgiveness or disunity.¹⁸ He reasons, "As soon as such a jurisdiction is created, Satan and his demons are able to invade the heavenly places from where they had been previously displaced. They are able to do this because Christians, through unresolved anger, deny the validity of the example described in Ephesians 3:9,10 by depriving each other of grace."¹⁹ The devil supposedly gains jurisdiction in the heavenlies every time Christians become angry (along with other problems like not being unified with the other churches in the city). If we say the wrong words, fail to get with the dominionist spiritual warfare program, insist on doctrinal purity at the expense of unity, or are simply ignorant about the nature, identity, or plans of the various levels of evil spiritual forces at work in the world, we are guilty of placing Satan in authority over our cities and nations. I am not over-stating their position; it is reiterated throughout their writings. If this is all true, what hope is

there? According to this teaching, God is not our hope, but our words, our "revelation knowledge," our strategies, and our willingness to submit to the teachings of the prophets of this new movement are our hope.

We cannot even hope in the return of Christ, according to some. Earl Paulk writes, "Until the Church exercises her authority, Jesus Christ will never return."²⁰ Given the assumptions of these teachings, it is hard to see that there can be any hope. Christ's sovereign authority has supposedly become vulnerable to being fumbled back to the devil by the weaknesses and tendencies to fall short of Christian perfection of His followers. Satan keeps getting more jurisdiction! Silviso asserts,

These two elements [anger & grieving the Spirit] allow the devil and his forces of wickedness to move into jurisdictions in the heavenly places created by our disobedience. Because Satan cannot challenge Jesus' authority, he then challenges the Church in the realm of delegated authority. In essence, it is a repeat of what he did in the Garden of Eden."²¹

We supposedly can give Christ's authority back to Satan, as if the devil ever really had it!

The power of our words is considered a creative force that we have to establish God's rule. Under a section entitled, "Creating With God," John Dawson writes, "Because we are the legal stewards of this planet, it is important for a human being to speak out authorization for action on the part of angels."²² Dominion for us is supposedly in a power of "binding and loosing" (see CIC Issue 1 for how this phrase is mis-used) that we can invoke based on Matthew 18:18. Dawson continues, "Within our right of dominion is the privilege of speaking into existence the purpose of God as He reveals His mind to us."²³ The dominionist theory sees words, coupled with unity and faith as being forces that give humans the power to "establish reality."

Several dominionist teachers use the story of the Tower of Babel as an example of this supposed human power. The human power of words and unity, they claim, can be used by anyone for either good or evil. They attribute the Day of Pentecost to human unity. Supposedly, if the church becomes unified and uses the techniques we have been discussing, we can create Christian dominion over the

entire planet without the return of Christ. We are promised greater miracles than Jesus did, greater revival than the book of Acts, and power and authority previously unknown in church history. All of this while God is “at risk, vulnerable,” and having somehow lost His sovereign control over His own creation.

An example of how far some of these teachers go in twisting the scripture can be found in Francis Frangipane’s explanation of the Tower of Babel. Citing **Genesis 11:6**, he comments, “He [God] said that whatever mankind imagined, it had the potential to accomplish.”²⁴ Not exactly. “*And the Lord said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’*” (**Genesis 11:6**). They purposed to build the Tower of Babel and would have done so had God not intervened. The imaginations and purposes of a united, fallen human race are evil (**Genesis 6:5**). God chose not to allow them to realize the full potential of their evil intents to complete their aspirations without submission to God’s authority.

Frangipane illustrates what he thinks the verse means by citing human accomplishments. He then comments,

Yet, today these things are part of our world because of man’s power to establish reality. If a man’s mind can imagine it and he can get others to believe in it, their spirits can accomplish it. And with few exceptions, nothing will be impossible, even for as small a group as two or three, once they believe a thing can happen.²⁵

This hardly differs from the popular New Age credo that is constantly repeated, “whatever a man can conceive and believe, man can achieve.”

Genesis 11 teaches the sovereign power of God to intervene in human affairs, not some innate power of unity that anyone can tap into to “establish reality.” Yet dominionist spiritual warfare teachers urge the church to use the supposed innate power of unity to take control of cities and nations. Consider this: what did happen at the Tower of Babel? They never completed it. God intervened, confused their languages, and scattered them all over the earth. How can any Christian teacher assert that this incident shows unlimited human power to create and that God had somehow lost authority over the earth, both in the Old Testament and now in the New. The incident **demonstrates**

God’s unlimited, sovereign power to intervene in human history to accomplish His purposes.

Pat Robertson’s use of the passage is similar. After citing Genesis 11:6-8, he comments, “God’s assessment is blunt: Mankind in unity becomes absolutely overwhelming.”²⁶ How hard it seems for modern evangelicals to find the sovereignty of God anywhere, even where it is most powerfully demonstrated. This is sad. Many have opted for a man-centered theology that dishonors God. This theology will not result in the removal of principalities and powers, Christian dominion over cities, or a world under the dominion of Christian overlords. It will merely result in a church that is paralyzed by the fear that if one “negative confession” is uttered or if it becomes necessary to correct error rather than join a watered down ecumenism, we shall have given Satan jurisdiction over the Planet and God will be left on the outside looking in.

Nero Theology

Nero is famous for blaming the church for the burning of Rome. The Roman pagans frequently persecuted Christians, claiming they were responsible for the ills of their cities. Tertullian [2nd century church father] comments on this:

If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, “Away with the Christians to the lion!” What! shall you give such multitudes to a single beast?²⁷

What an ironic turn around when in our day Christian teachers blame the church for whatever happens in a given city! Ed Silvano asserts, “The state of the city is always the result of the Church’s condition.”²⁸ John Dawson claims, “We as believers hold the fate of our Cities in our hands. Revival or judgment — what will it be?”²⁹

One must wonder why Paul did not tell the Christians in Rome about these teachings. Why did they suffer such persecution (Paul ultimately was martyred there) when they could have simply used the power of their words to establish reality, come into complete unity, bound the strong man over the city, taken dominion over the city for the church, and had such a revival that no pagan

opposition would have remained. All of the horrors that happened to Christians in Rome over the next two hundred years could have been avoided. These teachings not only dishonor God, they dishonor faithful Christians who have preached the gospel for the last two thousand years. The cities of the world are still pagan, evidently the Christian missionaries throughout history just did not know how to take dominion over spiritual forces. May God help us honor Him by acknowledging His sovereign control over His own creation and the immutability of His purposes.

The story of God, man and eternity is not about a cosmic footrace with an uncertain ending. God’s eternal purposes are not tenuous, compromised, and about to be thwarted by man or devil. God will accomplish all of His purposes for His church, Israel, and the human race, these false teachings notwithstanding. He will do so through the simple message of the Gospel. “*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.*” (**1 Corinthians 1:21**). History is in God’s hands, not ours. Ours is to believe His word and honor Him with our dependent obedience.

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End Notes

1. Kenneth Copeland, “Following the Faith of Abraham 1” [Audio Cassette], (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1982).

2. Earl Paulk, *Held in the Heavens Until . . . God’s Strategy For Planet Earth*, (Atlanta: Dimension Publishers, 1985) 222.

3. Ed Silvano, *That None Should Perish -- How to reach Entire Cities for Christ Through Prayer Evangelism*, (Regal: Ventura, CA, 1994) 195.

4. Op. Cit., Copeland.

5. Ibid.

6. *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed Sinclair Ferguson, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988) s.v. “Atonement,” 55.

7. see the excellent book by D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988) 125-126 for the roots of this doctrine in the health and wealth movement.

8. Op. Cit., Silvoso, 195.
9. Larry Lea, *The Weapons of Your Warfare -- Equipping Yourself to Defeat the Enemy*, (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1989) 27,28.
10. Op. Cit., Silvoso, 117.
11. Ibid. 119.
12. Ibid. 194.
13. John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities For God -- How to Break Spiritual Strongholds*, (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1989), 208. I wrote a letter to John several years ago about my concerns and received a very kind, gracious reply. He showed Christian love and humility in his response. I include material from his book here because it is an example of this type of spiritual warfare teaching and as far as I know he still endorses it.
14. Francis Frangipane, *The Three Battlegrounds*, (Marion, IA: Advancing Church Publications, 1989) 116, emphasis in the original.
15. Ibid. 108.
16. Ibid. 77 (emphasis in the original).
17. Op. Cit., Lea 41.
18. Op. Cit. Silvso, 120, 121.
19. Ibid. 121.
20. Op. Cit. Paulk, 61.
21. Op. Cit. Silvso, 121.
22. Op. Cit., Dawson, 200.
23. Ibid.
24. Op. Cit. Frangipane, 84.
25. Ibid. 84, 85.
26. Pat Robertson, *The Secret Kingdom*, (Nashville: Nelson, 1982) 172.
27. Tertullian, *Apology*, chap. 40.
28. Op. Cit., Silvoso, 215.
29. Op. Cit., Dawson, 58.