

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Binding And Loosing Part 2

written by Bob DeWaay

Last month we discussed the Biblical meaning of “binding and loosing” as used in the gospels. To bind is to forbid by doctrinal decision, to loose is to permit. Examination of the teachings and practice of the New Testament apostles reveals that modern binding and loosing theories are unbiblical. The new theory is that by verbally “binding” principalities and powers in the heavenly realm the church can “loose” people from spiritual bondage.

This is not what Christ meant in **Matthew 16:19** nor is it the way His apostles practiced their God-given authority. This month we will closely examine Paul's practice and teaching regarding spiritual warfare.

A major issue in spiritual warfare is “power.” Power of ability and power of authority are at issue. Of particular importance is God's power and how is it released to defeat Satan and liberate those who have been held captive by him. There are several key New Testament passages about the power of God in the ministry of God's word.

Paul uses the phrase “power of God” in **1Corinthians 1:24** to describe the message of “Christ crucified.” The message of the cross is the power of God, because it is the means by which God has spoiled the principalities and powers and set us free (**Colossians 2:13-15**). Changed lives evidence this “power,” not the degree of spectacular signs and wonders! The power of God is the power to take spiritually dead, physically dying people, facing eternal death in hell, and make them alive forever! Satan can produce “lying signs and wonders” (**Matthew 24:24, 2Thessalonians 2:9**), but he does not have the power to deliver us from death.

Romans 1:16 uses the term “power” similarly, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

1Thessalonians 1:5-9 also show Paul's use of the term power for the ability of the gospel to change lives: “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

“The term ‘power’ in these passages denotes God's work of changing lives morally, not amazing crowds through peculiar signs.”

In **1Corinthians 1:24, Romans 1:16, and 1Thessalonians 1:5**, “power” concerns the ability of God to change lives through the gospel message of Christ crucified. The term “power” in these passages denotes God's work of changing lives morally, not amazing crowds through peculiar signs. Faith in Christ, embracing the “scandal” of the cross, and obedience through the enablement of the indwelling Holy Spirit transforms lives so that recipients of God's power become living demonstrations of the truthfulness of the Gospel.

The purveyors of what I am describing as “Star Wars theology” misunderstand or misinterpret these passages where Paul defines what he means by “power.” They quote **1Corinthians 4:20** which says, “For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power.” They claim that this shows the relative unimportance of preaching and the importance of producing signs and wonders or other spiritual power displays. This ignores the context and puts Paul at odds with himself in this very epistle. The “power” of the kingdom of God in **1Corinthians 4:20** is the same “power” of God in **1Corinthians 1:24**! This is the power of God, through the cross, to change lives. Morally changed

lives coupled with eternal salvation is one sign Satan can not duplicate. In the last days, signs will be done by those who like Pharaoh's magicians (see **2Timothy 3:8**) oppose the truth. However, the determinative sign is God's power over life and death, and His deliverance of His people from their spiritual bondage.

The false teachers described in **1Corinthians 4** had “words,” but not power. Why? Because their words were “arrogant” (**verse 19**), and pride is the very antithesis of the cross that expresses the true power of God. According to **2Corinthians 10**, pride is at the very heart of Biblical spiritual warfare. It was pride (see **Isaiah 14:12-15**) that caused Satan's fall from heaven. We have “divinely powerful” weapons to destroy “speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” (**2Corin. 10:5**). These lofty things are prideful thoughts of self-exaltation. A careful reading of the entirety of **2Corin. 10** makes this clear. Those who are exalting themselves through claimed “secret, spiritual knowledge” know nothing of the true power of God. They are still slaves of their fleshly motivations.

I believe that the new “binding and loosing” doctrine feeds these fleshly motivations. It places man at the center rather than God. It is pagan in that a person's destiny is supposedly determined by his ability, or that of others, to gain sufficient “spiritual knowledge” to manipulate cosmic forces for his own benefit. Biblical Christianity teaches that one's destiny is determined by the work of God and one's response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paganism in the Church

The pagan Greeks and Romans thought that various “gods” ruled the world. These gods were often at war with one another. Ancient polytheists thought that the destinies of humans were determined by their relationship to these deities. They designed many religious activities hoping to influence the gods or incur their favor. If someone allied himself with a particular god, he hoped that god would prevail and he would share in his destiny. In the mystery religions of the first century, secret, spiritual knowledge was the key to partaking in the destiny of the gods.¹

There are disturbing similarities in

some modern spiritual warfare teachings. Influencing and manipulating cosmic spiritual rulers supposedly determines the salvation and well-being of those involved. The way one is to influence these evil forces is through extra-biblical revelations and new spiritual technologies unknown to Christ and His apostles. The New Testament does not support this approach to spiritual warfare.

Biblical Christianity believes in the one true God, the triune God of the Bible. He rules over the entire universe, including all spiritual beings, good or bad. People who know Him through the second person of the trinity, Jesus Christ, have obtained salvation as a gift from God. Through the cross we are in Christ. To be in Christ involves both legal justification and relationship with God. Principalities and powers do not determine our blessedness, spiritual and physical well-being, or eternal destiny.

Consider what Paul says about Jesus Christ in **Ephesians 1:18-22**:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church.

The key to victory over the forces of darkness is to be “seated... with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus” (**Ephesians 2:6**). This is what God has done for us through the cross. We are saved by faith, not works. The Bible is clear about the dominion of Christ over any so-called “gods.” We do not obtain the blessing of Christ in our lives through “binding,” rebuking, manipulating, or seeking to otherwise directly influence the “prince of the power of the air” (**Eph. 2:2**) and his emissaries. We obtain it by being in Christ through faith. Paganism leaves us seeking to solve our own problems through rearranging the cosmic terrain.

Let us examine the practice of Paul as recorded in the Book of Acts to confirm that the preaching of the unadulterated gospel has the power to deliver all who are willing to repent and believe. The account concerns Paul's ministry in Ephesus, the city given over to paganism and the worship of demonic “gods.” **Acts 18:19 through Acts 19:41** give us the history of this ministry. **Acts 20:17-35** is Paul's message to the Ephesian elders, which shows the nature of his ministry in Ephesus. The Bible reveals how God turned a pagan city “up side down” and established a mature church in the midst of demonic idol worship.

The city of Ephesus was given over to the worship of Diana, the pagan goddess. These pagans considered fornication an act of worship. Idols were everywhere. If binding and loosing as now taught is valid, this was the place to use it. Yet, according to the Biblical record, Paul never “bound the spirit of Diana” before or during his ministry in Ephesus.

Paul's custom, upon coming to a new city, was to go into the synagogue and reason with the Jews from the Scripture, showing that Jesus was the Messiah (see **Acts**

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17:1-3; 10,11; 18:3-5, etc.). Ephesus was no different. He went first to the synagogue and “reasoned with the Jews” (**Acts 18:19**). Paul left Ephesus shortly, to return later.

When Paul returned to Ephesus, after correcting some “disciples” who had not heard of the Holy Spirit, he “entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God” (**Acts 19:8**). Some would not listen, so he “took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (**Acts 19:9,10**). God performed miracles of healing and deliverance. Those who came to the Lord repented of their occult involvement, burning their paraphernalia (**Acts 19:18,19**).

Diana “Dethroned”

So many people repented that the idol makers were outraged. They said, “And not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis [Latin “Diana”] be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship should even be dethroned from her magnificence” (**Acts 19:27**).

The powerful, persistent preaching and teaching of the gospel and the changed lives of those who heard and repented caused even Diana's closest followers to fear that she would be “dethroned.” Paul cast demons out of individuals, but there is no record of him speaking directly to any “territorial spirits” or spiritual principalities in the heavenly realm.

To Serve Christ or Satan?

The issue in spiritual warfare is the allegiance of individuals either to Christ through the gospel or to Satan through their sin and alienation from God. The following verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church demonstrate this truth: “To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (**Ephesians 3:8-10**). **Verse 6** of this chapter shows that “mystery” as used by Paul means, “That the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

God's wisdom (see **1Corin. 1:24** for definition) confronts the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm through the saving of their previous subjects and bringing them into the church. The Spirit-filled, powerful, preaching of the gospel and the response of faith in the hearers plunders Satan's kingdom. **Ephesians 3** is confirmed by the historical record of the Book of Acts. The wisdom and power of God are demonstrated through the Gospel, not through direct verbal assault on unseen spiritual beings in the heavenly realm.

The often quoted reference in **Ephesians 6:12** to our “struggle” against the “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” does not prove modern spiritual warfare theories. The armor of

God (**Eph. 6:11-19**) has nothing to do with secret knowledge of territorial spirits, utterances, or other popular, modern procedures. It is about the truth, righteousness, the Gospel, the faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer. These are the very weapons Paul used in Ephesus. They are just as effective today.

Paul left Ephesus, but returned later and addressed the elders. The Biblical account of this event gives us an even clearer view of Paul's procedure, heart, and message. Paul told, "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ"(**Acts 20:20,21**). He also said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (**verse 27**). The New Testament contains the truths God inspired Paul to teach patiently in Ephesus during his years of ministry there. Nothing profitable has been withheld from us.

Magical Techniques?

Are we to imagine that today, the preaching and teaching of the gospel will no longer have the same effect that it did in Ephesus? Can it be true that people cannot be delivered now except through a new revelation or spiritual technology, unknown to Paul and the other apostles? The church in Ephesus was established without one principality or power ruling over the city being "bound" by loud, verbal assaults. The healings and exorcisms that occurred in Ephesus were evidences of the power of God at work through the preaching of the gospel.

Acts 19:12 tells that, "Handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out." Amazingly, some modern teachers have read the account of Paul in Ephesus and seen the "handkerchiefs" as the most prominent point, the key to Paul's method. Over the TV, they ask Christians to send money, so that they can receive their special "prayer cloth," which will catalyze "their" miracle.

Some have suggested putting these under the pillow of an unsaved loved one, in hope that this would cause he or she to become saved. Paul did not save people with cloths; God saved people through the message of the gospel. The text in Acts

says that "God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul" (**Acts 19:11**). If these could be reproduced by anyone with a pile of handkerchiefs, they would not be "extraordinary." Paul's method was teaching the Scripture. God performed signs according to His sovereign will, though Paul was the vessel God used. The text does not say that the handkerchiefs were Paul's message, his fund-raising technique, or even that he explicitly approved of the practice. It simply says that people carried these from Paul's body and that miracles occurred.

Some Jewish exorcists tried to duplicate Paul's success. They said "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches," hoping to persuade demons to leave the oppressed. The results were: "And the evil spirit answered and said to them, 'I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded" (**Acts 19:15,16**).

They evidently supposed that there was some innate, magical power in the utterance of Jesus' name that would force evil spirits to obey them. They even had the right "Jesus," i.e., the "one whom Paul preaches." Why did they fail? Because they had no authority. They had no authority because they had no **relationship** with Jesus. They had no relationship because they had not embraced the cross. They were in bondage to the very Evil One whose evil emissaries they were trying to remove.

Secret Knowledge?

This illustrates a very important principle about spiritual warfare and deliverance: it is based on **relationship** rather than **knowledge**. God delivers us because He is Almighty God and He loves us. Our victory is based on our knowledge of God not our knowledge of demons, their names, their bosses (i.e., "controlling spirits"), or secret utterances and formulas. "Occult" means "secret knowledge;" and these exorcists thought that Paul had discovered the secret. Greek mystery religions had "gods" with secret names that

would empower those who learned them.

Much teaching in the church on this is as confused as these misguided deliverers. For example, **Hosea 4:6** states "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." This verse is often quoted to prove that without revelation knowledge about principalities and powers, names of demons, or other occult phenomena, God's people will be destroyed. As is commonly the practice, the meaning of the passage has been twisted by refusal to read it in its

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context. **Hosea 4:1** states "...the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land." The knowledge they were lacking was the knowledge of **God**, not the secret names of evil forces! The last part of **verse 6** laments "... you have forgotten the law of your God." The error could have been avoided by reading the entire verse. They did not know God or His word.

People are subject to Satan because they do not know God, not because of ignorance of the various spiritual "secrets" of Satan's kingdom. Paul does say that he was "not ignorant of Satan's schemes" (**2Corinthians 2:11**). In context he was speaking of the need for Christians to forgive one another in obedience to Christ. The scheme of Satan was to get them not to obey Christ. Paul's knowledge was of Christ and His will and Satan's purpose to get us to disobey God. Again, knowledge concerning details of the Satanic kingdom which God has not chosen to reveal to us is not the issue.

Christians have victory over Satan because of their relationship with God, not because of having secret knowledge about Satan's kingdom of darkness. By taking the focus of our faith off our relationship with God and on to Satan and evil forces of darkness, modern spiritual warfare teachers are making the same mistake as the seven sons of Sceva. They will get similar results.

When Paul later wrote to Timothy at Ephesus, false teachers had arisen from their own midst just as he predicted in Acts 20. Some were so bad as to be described as "having been held captive by him [Satan] to do his will" (**2Timothy**

2:26). Surely now Paul will let Timothy know about “binding and loosing” and more advanced exorcism techniques! No, but he gives some seemingly mundane (though exceedingly wise) advice. He says “...the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (**2Timothy 2:24,25**).

Rather than advanced spiritual technology, Paul sees teaching, the sovereign action of God, and repentance as the keys to deliverance from Satan. The teaching that Timothy is to give is Bible teaching, as shown in the next chapter of Second Timothy.

The Lie Versus The Truth

There is a pattern emerging as we examine these New Testament texts. The pattern is that the truth indeed does set us free (**John 8:32**). The devil is a liar (**John 8:44**). From the first incident of human deception (with Adam and Eve) until he is finally banished from the face of the earth, he uses lies to hold mankind in bondage. The battle is a battle of truth and error. Specifically, it is **the lie** versus **the truth**. The lie is the lie that man (hoping to be self-ruling like God) can rebel against God and not die (**Genesis 3:4,5**). The truth is the gospel of Jesus Christ. **2Thess. 2:9-12**, which describes the activity of Antichrist, shows these two concepts at work.

...that is the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

“What is false” in **verse 11** is literally in the Greek, “the lie.” In **John 8:44**, Jesus called Satan the father of “the lie.” Paul gives two reasons why people believe the lie. They do not “receive the love of the truth,” and they “took pleasure in wickedness.” The gospel of Jesus Christ is the truth that leads to our salvation. Since it confronts our sin, convicts us, and calls us to repentance, many prefer the lie! The

lie says the same thing that it has always said: “You can sin and not die, you can be as God” (i.e., autonomous). The cross says otherwise! The essence of spiritual warfare is God's truth revealed in the person of Jesus Christ through the cross confronting and defeating Satan's lie.

The “casting down of ruling principalities and powers” through naming them, determining their geographical sphere of influence, and “binding” them is absent from the New Testament! Magical utterances or incantations have no power to set captives free. The Holy Spirit working through the preaching of the gospel does.

Even “the name of Jesus,” spoken boldly in prayer, is not a magical epithet. It is a declaration of whose authority it is by which we speak and act. If we depart from the teachings of Scripture, we depart from the true authority of Christ. Saying “in the name of Jesus” does not give any real authority to a false teaching. Those who try to operate thus shall be like those in **Matthew 7**, who in Jesus' name cast out demons. He never knew them.

It strikes me that if those who are caught up in these fanciful deliverance and spiritual warfare theories would just stand back a bit and look at things from a broader, Biblical perspective, they could see their error. Could it be true that a person, upon responding to the gospel in faith, repentance, and obedience, would be left by God in spiritual bondage because of ignorance of elaborate theories about Satan and demons? If we call upon the Lord according to the promises and terms of **Romans chapter 10**, will God fail to deliver us because we did not yet discover the name of a “control spirit” ruling over our neighborhood? If so, Christians for nearly two thousand years have lived out their lives in demonic bondage because the historical church did not know about these new theories and technologies.

“We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” - 1John

Are truths and promises of this passage dependent on our knowledge about demons, principalities, special utterances, extra-biblical spiritual formulas, etc.?

OR - Are they dependent on our relationship with God? Clearly the later is true. John differentiates Christians and the world. Christians do not practice (the continuous present tense “keep on practicing sin” is used in **verse 18**) sin. Jesus keeps us so that the Evil One cannot touch us. In contrast, the world lies in the power of Satan. This is true because of God's love for us and what He has done through the cross for our deliverance. We too once lived in bondage (see **Ephesians 2:1-9**) to sin and Satan, but now we are free! No amount of shouting or “binding” will change either one of these facts: our victory or the world's bondage to Satan. Only the work of God in Christ will set the captives free.

The truth is so much more profound (although simple) than the complicated spiritual theories that are offered to take its place. The teaching and preaching of the word of God is the commission of the church. Inventing new spiritual technologies and theories is not.

Binding and “loosing” as taught in these new theories is actually binding and “losing.” The time and attention of God's people are being taken off preaching the gospel and being witnesses for Christ as commanded in the Bible. In the place of our true responsibilities, we are being told that we must “take dominion” over geopolitical entities by “binding” the Satanic hosts that control them. This does not disturb Satan one bit. With this false teaching, we “lose” and he “wins.” We lose in the sense of failing to fulfill God's purpose for us. Saying “I bind you Satan” will not stop his activity. If we preach the gospel to one person and that person repents and believes, Satan's kingdom is thereby plundered. The angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents. If we obey the true commission given us by Christ and His apostles, we shall have victory.

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End Notes

1. see Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Eerdmans, Vol. 4; pages 802-808 on Greek mystery religions.

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