

# WEAPONS FOR WARFARE

By Steve Zeisler

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You may be familiar with the works of the author John White. He's a forceful writer with a powerful prose style, and he takes on significant, hard-hitting issues. It's hard to read his books without being captivated by the strength of his writing. When I saw him in person for the first time, however, I was surprised at his visual appearance, because it is the opposite of his forceful writing style. He is short, balding, bespectacled, and soft-spoken.

I was reminded of John White when I read the opening verses of chapter 10 of 2 Corinthians, because Paul suffered some accusations for similar reasons. Verses 1 and 2:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you--I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.

Paul was accused of being timid and lacking strength when he was with the Corinthians. Then when he went away he wrote forceful letters that raised hard issues. Verse 10 of this chapter takes up this accusation:

For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

They were claiming not just that he was different in person than in his letters, but that his letters were a sham. The real Paul was the soft-spoken, unimpressive individual, so they didn't have to take his letters seriously. There's an apocryphal work dating back to the second century called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* that gives a physical description of Paul. Many scholars believe it accurately represents what Paul looked like: "A man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body with eyebrows joining, and the nose somewhat hooked." Paul wasn't an orator, and he was a very ordinary-looking man. So his accusers advised the Corinthians not to pay attention to his letters. The content of them--the claims of apostleship, the knowledge of God--was all suspect.

## **The meekness of Christ**

But Paul turns that argument on its head here. He's saying that the reality is what they read. These are the statements they ought to attend to. In effect, he's saying that he has deliberately chosen when present with them not to be bold but to be meek. He doesn't make himself the center of attention or demand obeisance for a good reason. He reminds them in verse 1 that Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, was himself meek and gentle. "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you . . . that when I come I may not have to be bold." Paul is saying he has the capacity for boldness and the authority as an apostle to command respect. He can deal with opposition, and he may have to do so when he comes to Corinth. His refusal to do so earlier was based on a decision to emulate the Lord in meekness.

What is meekness, and why was Jesus meek and gentle? Why does Paul advocate leadership that has meekness at its heart? The best definition of meekness I've heard is "strength under control." It is not the same as weakness, although these words have some of the same connotations in our minds. In fact, if anything, meekness is the opposite of weakness. A meek person is someone who has the capacity for strength and authority, but has deliberately shrouded, or limited, this strength.

Imagine a German shepherd trained to defend your home. If an intruder approaches, this animal will attack viciously and powerfully on command. But this German shepherd is also your family pet. The toddler of the home can step in its water dish, pull its tail, or yell in its ear, and because this animal is trained to meekness around family members, it restrains itself from the violence of which it is capable.

**A meek person is someone who has the capacity for strength and authority, but has deliberately shrouded or limited this strength**

I've seen very skilled athletes restrain themselves. Imagine a great tennis player, capable of playing at an international level, teaching a child to play tennis. He pats the ball over the net so the child can occasionally hit the ball back. If he chose to, he could annihilate this young learner by his shots, but he doesn't. He is meek. He wants to benefit the child, so he restrains himself.

Jesus could have called legions of angels to do exactly as he chose at any point of his life on earth. The devil offered him the kingdoms of this world. He had the opportunity, for evil's sake or by his own command, to serve himself, but he never chose to do so. He never dominated his opponents. He wanted to do good to others, even those who were his enemies. He wanted to win them to himself, not crush them. So he came in meekness and gentleness. Paul says he did the same thing. He has decided that Christian leadership should be Christlike. Second Corinthians 10 through 13 is a wonderful examination of spiritual leadership, and it begins by highlighting the choice to be meek. Paul may have to be confrontational and call on the authority that is his when he comes. But he hopes he won't have to. He wants to persuade even those who are opposing him and misleading the Corinthians to choose to bow their knee before Christ.

## **Weapons for battle**

Now verse 3 begins a description of warfare:

For 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. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

It's interesting, now that the value of meekness has been raised, that the subject that follows should be warfare. When we think of warfare we think of power-military machines rolling across borders and subjugating opposition. Or if we're thinking of psychological warfare, emotional battles in homes or economic arguments in Congress, we think of people marshalling their strength and then dominating their opposition to force them to submit. Yet Paul has highlighted the importance of meekness before he goes on to talk about spiritual warfare. The two are very much related.

There are two points I'd like to make in this description of spiritual warfare. The first is that it is not worldly. To be a Christian means to be a soldier. We live in a world that is opposed to our Lord and his church. But we are not the kind of warriors who use the weapons of this world. The second point is that our warfare is not mindless. What we are after is to convince our opposition of the truth. We are not attempting to apply spiritual lightning bolts in a way that bypasses people's thinking, but our warfare engages their thinking. Taking thoughts captive in obedience to Christ is our aim, not overwhelming people with displays that don't persuade them.

What does it mean to have worldly warfare? An example might be the proper Christian concern about the proliferation of pornography. Pornography is a terrible and growing blight in this country. It creates a dangerous world for children to grow up in. The National Endowment for the Arts, as you know, has come under criticism for its inability to distinguish between art and pornographic junk. As Christians we ought to have deep concern that pornography should be fought, and we should hope for a world in which it has less

and less influence. We may fight alongside secular feminists, Mormons, or other groups who aren't Christian and who also want to see pornography's influence limited. We can stand beside them as citizens of this nation, vote for officials who will make better decisions, pass laws that will be helpful, urge that Supreme Court Justices be appointed who have a sense of morality, and so forth.

## **The nature of strongholds**

But these are not at the heart of what it means to serve Christ in the battle for his truth. Our first and deepest goal is to tear down strongholds, destroying places where evil is entrenched. Paul makes the point that evil is entrenched in the thinking of people. It is pretensions, the ideas that oppose knowledge of God, that are the ultimate strongholds. People behave the way they do because they have strongholds in their belief systems. What makes them willing to give in to the attraction to pornography is misguided beliefs about sexuality, righteousness, and who they are. It's the stronghold of misunderstanding a righteous God, his claim upon people's lives, and the idea that our sexuality should be joyful and honorable. The strongholds inside make people vulnerable to the external behavior. Our business as the Christian church is to attack the strongholds, not just the periphery. It's to march past the distant border and go all the way to the capital city, to take on the ideas on the inside and tear them down by application of spiritual weapons.

That is why the Bible talks about prayer as a weapon for Christians. We are asking God himself to invade beyond the seen things and apply himself to the hearts and minds of people, to help them find clarity where the devil has sown confusion. Sometimes people hate themselves and live destructively. We spoke earlier today about the suicide of a young man of extraordinary gifts who somehow had become so victimized by a stronghold in his thinking that he had no other choice in his own mind but to take his life. There are people in this room who live painful lives because of things others have said about them, family patterns they've grown up in, habits they've succumbed to, feelings of shame, and so on. These are strongholds in their experience, so they live out lives of hurting themselves and others, often tortured behind the facade they put up. Prayer becomes a tremendous weapon for us as we ask God to deal with the reality, not the appearance, and the Spirit of God to apply truth.

Faith is also a weapon for Christians. We insist that we remain committed to the truth even when it looks like the truth is failing. We trust God to keep his word despite appearances to the contrary. As others see the faith of believers, they begin to believe themselves that God can be counted on even though it looks like all that is wicked is winning.

Loving our enemies becomes a weapon, because love penetrates beyond anything else. Those who would hurt, frighten, or ignore us, whose lifestyles we reject, become objects of our love. We care enough to want to deal with the stronghold, not the outside behavior but the wicked untruth that's behind it in the heart and the thinking. That's why Paul says we're taking thoughts captive. We destroy pretension, pride that says, "I am God." We attack the stronghold where the individual is on the throne and the Lord is set aside-by love, expressing the truth, commitment to faith, and prayer. These things are the means for dealing with the real, inner issue. Our weapons are not worldly.

## **The importance of persuasion**

The second point I want to make is that our weapons are not mindless. Many of you are familiar with Frank Peretti's books *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness*. I found particularly helpful his recognition that our weapons are not worldly weapons. He tells a tale of small churches and ordinary Christians in settings where evil is rampant in the great organizations of the day. Ordinary people, as they meet to pray and hold one another up, refusing to succumb to the world's point of view, become the center of the activity of God, and organized evil is overthrown. A concern I have, however, is the sense that spiritual battle in these books bypasses our thinking. The appeal is to powers we don't understand and never see, and they engage in the battle. The issue is never interior to the Christian nor to anyone else. We're not persuading people to be converted to the truth, enjoying God and what he's doing, understanding and following him intelligently.

But that is not what Paul is speaking of here at all. Most of the time our battle is not with demons; it's with the flesh or the world system, which is the amalgam of human flesh on earth. We speak to our humanistic

neighbors, for instance, helping them see what happens if their thinking is followed to its logical conclusion. We offer insight into what God has said and urge conversion, not just acquiescence. Most of the time spiritual warfare ought not to bypass the mind. We don't hurl thunderbolts of power and overwhelm people, leaving them wondering what happened. Paul's succinct phrase here is that we demolish pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. We help people give their thinking over to the Lord.

There's a phenomenon among evangelical Christians that I'd also like to comment on at this point, the growing enthusiasm for reconstructionism. It grows out of a theological point of view that says, in effect, that it is up to the church to usher in the kingdom of God. Jesus has done his work; now it's time for us to do our work. We are to bring to heel every wicked institution and establish the Law of Moses in the laws of this world. It's time to get over this business of Christians being a minority and taking their lumps as they stand for what is right. We must rightfully insist on having things our way. Then once we get this world shaped up, Jesus will come and reign on earth.

### **The centrality of the cross**

What's behind that kind of thinking is a sense of being tired of bearing the cross, of seeing the good guys always losing. It's very attractive to many bright, capable people. But it grows out of a misunderstanding of eschatology (end times). It clearly flies in the face of the meekness of Paul and Christ, the warfare that persuades.

Paul says in verse 6 that when obedience is complete, there will come a time for authority to apply force. Jesus came once as a sufferer to offer himself for us. He will come a second time as the Lord. When the wooing of those who reject him is over, he will come on a horse with a sword proceeding from his mouth. Destruction will take place, and all opposition will end. Those who hate him will bow their knee before him and call him Lord.

But those are the last events, and in the meantime what we need to do is present a living Savior who remains meek. We must trust invisible weapons to do their work. We must hope to persuade our enemies, not hurt them. In the long run there is unavoidable cost to us as there was cost to Christ. We need to be on guard against the understandable but dangerous misapprehension of those who say it's our turn to win now, to take up the sword as the crusaders did and forcefully Christianize the environment.

### **Taking thoughts captive in obedience to Christ is our aim, not overwhelming people with displays that don't persuade them**

A group of us were together over the weekend, and we shared communion. I was again struck by the unforgettable words of the invitation of Christ. "This is my body which is for you. This is my blood which is shed for you." The offer he makes is that we may gain life by his suffering. He could command but does not. He only offers himself that we might love him for his own sake. The war we're fighting is on his behalf. We must never lose sight of our most profound weapon, which is telling the truth about Jesus. When he is seen as he is he attracts people. We don't have to destroy our enemies; we can invite them to accept Jesus' offer and receive him as their Savior.

The question of doing battle against the flesh also comes back to us. We are taking thoughts captive, not because we're forced to but because we want to. We want the Lord to own our thinking. We want to set aside all that which is self-serving, foolish, and hurtful, which promotes us and denies Christ. We want our thoughts to conform to him. He offers us himself, and the result should be "thoughts captive in obedience to Christ." Will you allow your thoughts to be his?

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