

# **PAUL AND THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD: A LESS MYSTICAL, MORE PRACTICAL, STILL PENTECOSTAL INTERPRETATION AND APPROACH**

## **Practical Theology/Christian Formation Interest Group**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Every semester I interact with students from Christian homes who, because they have become distracted, discouraged, and defeated in their walk with Christ, have either adopted a post-Christian posture with respect to the faith, or possess a strong inclination to do so. I want to suggest that at least some of the loss of Christian conviction/commitment I see occurring in the lives of university students raised in the church is avoidable. In addition to *evangelizing*, *edifying*, and *equipping* their parishioners, local churches simply must become more intentional about something we might refer to as *endurance training*.

The notion of endurance training is supported by the fact that the possibility of renouncing or walking away from one's Christian faith is something the biblical authors frequently warned their readers about.<sup>1</sup> Notably, many of warnings texts use the language of struggle, conflict, contention, and resistance when exhorting readers to "stand firm" in the faith.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following references are to New Testament passages which warn of the possibility spiritual apostasy and/or encourage an avoidance of it: Mt 24:10-13; Lk 8:13; Jn 15:1-6; Ro 11:17-22; 1 Cor 9:24-10:12; 15:1-2; 16:13; 2 Cor 1:24; 11:2-3; Gal 4:8-20; 5:2-6; Col 1:21-23; 1 Thess 3:5; 1 Tim 1:18-19; 3:6-7; 4:1-10; 5:8; 6:9-12, 20-21; 2 Tim 2:11-13; 2:16-21; 4:7-8; Heb 2:1-4; 3:6-14; 4:1-2; 6:4-12; 10:26-39; 12:15-17; Jas 5:19-20; 1 Pet 5:8-9; 2 Pet 1:5-11; 2 Pet 3:17; 1 Jn 2:24-28; 2 Jn 1:9; Jude 1:3-5, 20-25; Rev 3:1-6, 11, 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Mt 24:10-13; 1 Cor 9:24-10:12; 15:1-2; 16:13; 2 Cor 1:24; 1 Tim 1:18-19; 6:9-12, 20-21; 2 Tim 2:16-21; 4:7-8; 1 Pet 5:8-9; 2 Pet 3:17; 1 Jn 2:24-28.

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To be even more specific, some of these passages, refer explicitly to the notion that a primary foe with respect to our faith is the devil, Satan, the “evil one,” or demons and the teachings they inspire.<sup>3</sup>

One passage that fits into all three of the categories just referred to is the focus of this paper. In Ephesians 6:10-20 we read:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>{11}</sup> Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. <sup>{12}</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>{13}</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>{14}</sup> Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>{15}</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>{16}</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>{17}</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>{18}</sup> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

<sup>{19}</sup> Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>{20}</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.<sup>4</sup>

Many biblical scholars are convinced that this passage is important not only because it seems to summarize the letter to the Ephesians as a whole—or at least the *paraenesis* (practical moral and ministry application) section of the letter (4:1–6:9)<sup>5</sup>—but also because it provides the most

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Mt 6:13; Jn 17:15; Rom 8:37-38; 2 Thess 3:1-5; 2 Cor 11:1-3; 1 Tim 3:6-7; 4:1; 5:14-15; 1 Pet 5:8-9; 1 Jn 2:13-14; Rev 2:10, 13, 24-25. For more on this, see the table titled “Imagery of Warfare and Struggle in the New Testament” in Clinton E. Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997), 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Though the authorship of the Epistle to the Ephesians is debated among New Testament scholars, this paper will presume the authorship/influence of the apostle Paul. At the very least, Ephesians 6:19-20 and the many echoes of Pauline themes found throughout the entire letter, indicate that the author was quite familiar with both the theology of Paul as well as his pastoral concerns.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Leslie Mitton refers to this passage as the “culmination of the epistle.” (See C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 218.) Clinton Arnold writes: “The call to acquire divine strengthening for the purpose of engaging the spirit-forces of evil (Ephesians 6: 10-20) is not an irrelevant appendix to the epistle. It is a crucial part of the paraenesis to which the rest of the epistle

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elaborate discussion of spiritual warfare to be found in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that nearly all the freshman students enrolled in my university-required THEO 101 – Foundations of Christian Life course, come to it each semester with virtually no pre-understanding of what it means to accomplish what Paul was calling for his readers to do in this famous passage. Indeed, I can attest that many of my students, even those who hail from Christian homes and have some church experience, seem to be somewhat nonplussed when, in a lecture on the problem of evil, I indicate that we need to factor the reality and work of Satan into the equation. The upshot seems to be that, whatever spiritual formation these Christian students have experienced prior to their going away to college, it did not include a serious discussion of how to put on the whole armor of God. If this is true, it begs an important question: *What might be the reason(s) why Paul’s “armor of God” discussion is not more often actualized in the lives of church members?*

In the introduction to the book *The Evangelical’s Guide to Spiritual Warfare*, the author observes:

Many evangelicals act as if the enemy does not exist. In preaching and teaching and our daily lives, we act as if Satan and his forces are not a problem. We go about our business as if the evil in the world is explainable in some way other than that there is an enemy behind it.”<sup>7</sup>

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has been pointing.” Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 103, 105. See also, Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 432, 438, 456; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 457. Note: though I’m aware of the controversy regarding O’Brien’s commentary on Ephesians, I have chosen to cite it nevertheless, convinced that: (a) an important distinction can be made between plagiarism that’s intentional and that which is not (e.g., that occurring as result of a less than fully alert use of research provided by an assistant. Of course, readers of this paper are free to disregard any references to O’Brien’s work if they feel the need to do so.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ed Murphy indicates that throughout the history of the church this passage has been viewed as “the manual on victorious spiritual warfare.” See Ed Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 402. See also Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Kraft, *The Evangelical’s Guide to Spiritual Warfare: Scriptural Insights and Practical Instruction on Facing the Enemy* (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 2015), 15. Kraft goes on to utter this lamentation: “Though traditional evangelical seminaries and Bible schools claim to be biblical, they usually provide little or no instruction in this important area. Evangelical teachers and pastors, even those who are most critical of the “demythologizing” of liberals, tend to treat anything to do with demons as if they do not exist today. And if teachers

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Obviously, if the culture of a church doesn't take the concept of supernatural evil seriously, it will affect the way Ephesians 6:10-20 is presented and responded to. But, that said, I'm sure that at least some of my nonplussed students have been nurtured in churches where the reality of the evil one is acknowledged. *So, what might explain their failure to treat the apostle Paul's "armor of God" discussion with the seriousness it deserves?*

Not discounting the very real possibility that some churchgoers, regardless of age, are simply not attending to the excellent teaching that's being presented to them, we should also consider the possibility that a more impactful preaching of this text has been hindered by a lack of helpful exegetical resources. For instance, the problem may lie in the fact that many *popular* treatments of this passage have produced an understanding of what it means to put on the armor of God that strikes many preaching and teaching pastors as *too mystical*. Some books and websites provide believers with a scripted prayer to be recited each morning. The daily ritual these approaches to putting on the armor of God prescribe can seem to be somewhat incantational/magical in orientation.<sup>8</sup> I suspect there's something about an overly ritualized or too-mystical interpretation of what Paul was calling for in his “armor of God” discussion that simply doesn't sit right with many evangelical or Pent-evangelical pastors. Put differently, because some popular expositions of Ephesians 6:10-20 aren't as exegetically responsible/careful as they need to be, they fail at enabling the thoughtful preaching pastor to present the passage with the kind informed enthusiasm that many church members find contagious.

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do recognize the existence of demons, they have no idea how to deal with them and so ignore them. Ignoring the activity of satanic forces allows them to run rampant with our churches and training institutions.” (See Kraft, 32-33.)

<sup>8</sup> As an example, see “Put on the Whole Armor of God Today: Prayer of Spiritual Warfare,” Eternal Affairs Media, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://biselliano.info/2018/03/05/put-armor-god-today-prayer-spiritual-warfare-733780/>.

At the same time, it’s my sense that many *scholarly* discussions of Ephesians 6:10-20 can also prove to be unhelpful to preaching pastors. I can think of several reasons why this might be true. First, it’s possible for a very careful exegetical treatment of a biblical text to be so technical in its style of presentation that it becomes essentially inaccessible to many preaching pastors.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, I’ll offer that many of the scholarly discussions of Ephesians 6:10-20 lack the crucial balance between *exegetical responsibility* and *existential impact* that many preaching pastors are looking for in a preaching resource. Specifically, some commentaries on this important text may be guilty of overemphasizing the notion that the “armor of God” discussion was intended by its author to function as a *peroratio* (a motivational summary of what had already been discussed in the letter).<sup>9</sup> Though I’m supportive of the theory that there’s a significant connection between Paul’s epistle-ending discussion and what has come before, an *overemphasis* on this theory can result in an interpretation of Ephesians 6:10-20 that’s essentially redundant, void of any sense that Paul was saying anything new in it.<sup>10</sup> For sure, many scholars will acknowledge that Paul was breaking some new ground here with his rather elaborate description of his readers’ spiritual enemy and the seriousness of the conflict before them. But I wonder if an interpretation of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion that doesn’t present anything new to the message of Ephesians in terms of specific behaviors to be employed, might not lead some pastors to preach and teach this text in a way that, while exegetically responsible,

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<sup>9</sup> See Lincoln, 432, 438-40; O’Brien, 458, 490. For his part, John Muddiman insists, over against the *peroratio* thesis, that Ephesians 6:10-20 “introduces a striking new image which is in some tension with the earlier material.” More specifically, Muddiman believes an editor may have intended the discussion in Ephesians 6:10-20 to function as an extension of the household code (6:1-9) for a category of church members not addressed in it: young men. Thus, Muddiman contends that the main purpose of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion was to exhort young Christian men to stand firm against sexual temptation. For more on this interpretive theory, see Frank Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Continuum, 2001), 282-84, 285.

<sup>10</sup> See David Powlison, “The Classical Model” in *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2012), 92.

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lacks existential (life-story shaping) impact. *Is it possible that viewing this important passage as simply a motivational summary can, ironically, have the effect of lessening rather increasing the sense of urgency with which some preaching pastors present this text to their congregations, and the way their congregants respond to it?*

Finally, related to what was just suggested, it may very well be that some pastors, especially those who self-identify as Pentecostal-charismatic, possess an intuitive sense that the role and importance of the Holy Spirit to the process of standing firm in the faith is much more significant than what many commentaries on this passage seem to suggest. Elsewhere I have written of the need for the recovery of a robust, fully Trinitarian, *realist rather than non-realist* doctrine of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Put simply, a *pneumatological realism* insists that, rather than conceive of the Holy Spirit as a philosophical concept or impersonal force that is simply *presumed* to be at work in believers’ lives, he can and should be known and interacted with in ways that are *personal, phenomenal, and life-story shaping*. Thus, a pneumatological realism produces among church members an important sense of pneumatological *expectancy* rather than *presumption*. Paul’s call in Galatians 5:25 for Christian disciples to “keep in step” with the Spirit seems to require a realist rather than non-realist understanding and experience of the Spirit—an ongoing act of prayerful surrender to the leadership of the Spirit that, this paper will argue, is crucial to putting on and keeping on the whole armor of God.

All of this leads me to suggest the need for a treatment of Ephesians 6:10-20 that, precisely because it’s Spirit-sensitive in its approach, is catalytic as well as careful. Identifying the basic contours of what an accurate yet life-story shaping understanding of Paul’s “armor of

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<sup>11</sup> Gary Tyra, *Getting Real: Pneumatological Realism and the Spiritual, Moral, and Ministry Formation of Contemporary Christians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), ix, 3–4, 7, 10, 15, 21–25, 54–55, 57, 85, 87, 99, 103, 106, 108, 118, 122, 124–25, 128n11, 129–30n15, 135–37, 139–40, 145, 158, 160–61, 172, 174, 178n106, 181.

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God” discussion might look like is what this essay aims to accomplish. After identifying some of the key earmarks of what I consider to be an exegetically-responsible handling of this passage, I will provide a necessarily brief but substantial survey of what a less mystical, more practical, still Pentecostal interpretation of, and approach to, putting on the whole armor of God might look like.

Along the way, the reader will, I trust, intuit some of the pastoral implications of a Spirit-sensitive understanding of this famous but often neglected biblical passage. In the end, I’m hopeful the interpretation of Ephesians 6:10-20 presented in this academic paper might function as a helpful resource for church leaders as they take seriously their responsibility to encourage and equip their parishioners to put on (and keep on) the full armor of God.

### **Some Earmarks of an Exegetically-Responsible Approach to Ephesians 6:10-20**

My aim in this section is not to discourse on good versus bad biblical exegesis in general, but simply to lay out what I consider to be some key features of a responsible exegetical approach to Paul’s “armor of God” discussion in particular. Five earmarks are worth noting.

First, we must take seriously the opinion of some scholars that this epistle-ending discussion was intended by Paul not only to *summarize* his letter to the Ephesians, but to *complete* it as well. For example, Gordon Fee implies as much when he writes: “Paul’s placing this material in the emphatic final position suggests that he has been intentionally building the letter to this climax right along.”<sup>12</sup> There most definitely is a connection between Paul’s “armor of God” discussion and the rest of the epistle (especially 4:1–6:9). But Ephesians 6:10-20 is more than a rousing recapitulation of what had already been articulated; some new, vitally important

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<sup>12</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1994), 723.

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exhortations are enunciated here! Indeed, my contention is that in his epistle-ending discussion, Paul was providing his readers with the key to actualizing all the spiritual, moral, and ministry exhortations the letter contains!

Second, without getting too bogged down in the process, we *should* do our best to discern the Old Testament and Apocryphal passages Paul likely had in mind when he pinned his armor of God discussion.<sup>13</sup> As will be indicated below, there are some important theological truths communicated in these influential passages which can help us nuance what Paul was up to in Ephesians 6:10-20.

Third, at the same time we should avoid the mistake of focusing too much attention on the armor rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> I fear that some commentaries run the risk of wearying or distracting readers with overly thorough, essentially speculative discussions of Paul’s take on the significance of each piece of armor. Over against this approach, I contend there are several reasons why a thoughtful interpretation of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion will, ironically, not be preoccupied with the armor rhetoric: first, the rhetoric is not original with Paul but is borrowed from various Old Testament passages;<sup>15</sup> second, the virtue associated with each piece of armor differs from one Old Testament passage to another;<sup>16</sup> and third, Paul himself is not consistent in the way he describes the spiritual significance of the various pieces of spiritual armor he encourages the readers of his letters to put on (see Eph 6:14, 17; cf. 1 Thess 5:8)! I’m

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<sup>13</sup> See Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4-6*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 768.

<sup>14</sup> Support for this suggestion can be found in Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 42; Robert Dean Jr. and Thomas Ice, *What the Bible Teaches about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 156.

<sup>15</sup> For example, some principal passages include Is. 11:5; 52:7; and 57:19.

<sup>16</sup> See Barth, 775n106; Muddiman, 291.



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not suggesting that we should completely ignore the armor rhetoric;<sup>17</sup> only that we devote the bulk of our attention to the actual virtues and behaviors Paul prescribes in his “armor of God” discussion.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, while always keeping in view the Old Testament passages Paul seems to have been inspired by,<sup>19</sup> our primary method as we attempt to interpret the virtues and behaviors Paul wanted his readers to focus on should be to examine what he had to say about these themes in earlier parts of Ephesians and other letters within the Pauline literary corpus. What did Paul have in mind when he encouraged his readers to *put on* the virtues of truth, righteousness, and the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace? What was he thinking when he instructed them to *take up* such things as faith, salvation, and the word of God? How did the missionary apostle refer to these virtues and behaviors elsewhere in his letters, especially his epistle to the Ephesians? These questions, I contend, are at the very center of a responsible approach to Paul’s “armor of God” discussion.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, given the way Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 6:10-20, elsewhere in the Ephesian letter, and in the rest of his letters, we simply must take seriously the possibility that

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg offers a balanced approach when he writes: “The author is less concerned with the weapons or articles of clothing themselves than with the function which is indicated for each of them: the belt (‘the truth’) surrounds and stiffens the body; the breastplate protects the warrior; the shoes indicate the readiness to spread peace, etc. It is a symbolic representation of the battle of the Christians against the evil in the world.” Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 276-77.

<sup>18</sup> Lincoln provides support for this exegetical move when he writes: “But the writer is not concerned with an accurate or detailed description of such armor. As we have seen, he omits some key items and includes other more general equipment, and in this his ultimate focus is on the Christian realities to which he desires to point. For this purpose he is aided more by his knowledge of OT imagery than by his observation of Roman soldiers. . . .” Lincoln, 436.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise yet substantial discussion of the Old Testament’s influence on Paul’s “armor of God” pericope, see Lincoln, 436-37.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that some scholars, such as Markus Barth, suggest that what Paul is exhorting his readers to embody are, technically, not virtues but the attributes/actions of the Messiah (cf. Is. 11:4-5)

the Spirit plays a pivotal role when it comes to Christian disciples resisting Satan and standing firm in the faith. This suggestion finds some significant support in the works of biblical scholars such as George Ladd and Gordon Fee. These eminent biblical theologians evidence the pneumatological realism inherent in Paul's theology by drawing attention to: (1) the many and striking ways the apostle referred to the personhood of the Spirit;<sup>21</sup> (2) the apostle's many references to the vital importance of the Holy Spirit to the Christian experience in general;<sup>22</sup> and (3) the way Paul seemed to conceive of the *existential significance* of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in particular. For example, presented below is a passage in which Fee contends that the apostle had experienced the Spirit of Christ as a personal, life-story shaping reality, and encouraged his readers to do likewise:

The Spirit is God's way of being present, powerfully present, in our lives and communities as we await the consummation of the kingdom of God. Precisely because he understood the Spirit as God's personal presence, Paul also understood the Spirit always in terms of an empowering presence; whatever else, for Paul the Spirit was an *experienced* reality.<sup>23</sup>

We should also note that Fee's writings, in particular, are filled with some rather strident assertions of the profound importance of the Holy Spirit to Paul's theology. Here's just one example:

*One reads Paul poorly who does not recognize that for him the presence of the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end.*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 830.

<sup>22</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 534.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 1996), xiii, emphasis original.

As we will soon see, Paul's notion of a Spirit-enabled experience of God's empowering presence almost certainly played a crucial role in his understanding of what it means to put on the armor of God. Thus, anything other than a Spirit-sensitive approach to this important text would not only fail at being exegetically careful, but would likely fall short of being existentially impactful as well.<sup>25</sup>

### **Toward an Interpretation of Ephesians 6:10-20 that is both Exegetically-Responsible and Existentially-Impactful**

For the sake of expediency, my approach here will not be a traditional, exhaustive verse-by-verse commentary. Rather, my tack will be to survey the main sections of the passage before us, highlighting those issues which are difference-making in terms of the overarching goal of this paper: a presentation of Paul's "armor of God" teaching that will be compelling as well as coherent.

#### **The Call to Arms (6:10-11)**

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>{11}</sup> Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. (Eph 6:10-11)

The first difference-making issue relates to the way Paul begins his "armor of God" discussion by emphasizing the need for Christian disciples to find strength in the Lord rather than rely on their own.<sup>26</sup> A theme that runs throughout Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the Christian disciple's experience of divine empowerment (see 1:15-21 and 3:14-19).<sup>27</sup> In keeping with this, at the

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the importance of the Holy Spirit to the ability of Christian disciples to render to God the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness he desires and deserves, see Tyra, *Getting Real*, 61-120.

<sup>26</sup> See Barth, 760-61; Lincoln, xli-xliii, 432-33; Mitton, 220.

<sup>27</sup> Both Clinton Arnold and Harold Hoehner take pains to indicate that Paul likely had in mind an empowerment by the Spirit à la Ephesians 3:16. See Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 107; Harold W. Hoehner,

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outset of what I playfully refer to as the Ephesian letter’s “*peroratio-plus*,” Paul exhorts his readers to experience divine empowerment by putting on the “armor of God.”<sup>28</sup>

Most scholars suggest that, given Paul’s apparent familiarity with passages such as Isaiah 11:5; 52:7; and 57:19, the idea connoted here is that *it’s God’s very own armor—armor also worn by Jesus himself—that Christian disciples are to don.*<sup>29</sup> Some support for this interpretation can be adduced from the fact Paul’s call in Ephesians 6 to put on the armor of God seems to parallel the one in 4:24 to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (cf. Col 3:1-10),<sup>30</sup> and the exhortation in 5:1 to “follow God’s example.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, we should also keep in mind this exhortation Paul directed toward the church members in Rome: “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14).

The point is that we find in Paul’s letters a strident call for Christian disciples to clothe themselves in a spiritually empowering manner. It’s also possible that the apostle meant for his readers to understand that this “suiting up” is not a one-time experience, but something engaged

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*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 820-21. See also Muddiman, 286-87.

<sup>28</sup> O’Brien points out that, the imperative “be strong,” can also be understood as a passive. Thus, it might also be translated as “be made strong, be strengthened.” O’Brien, 460; see also Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 170.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Lincoln, 437, 441-42; O’Brien, 457, 463, 473; Barth, 769; Hoehner, 821; Schnackenburg, 277; Foulkes, 171. Dean and Ice, 157. Going further, pastor and Bible teacher, Ray Stedman, asserts that it’s not so much that the armor referred to in Ephesians 6:10-20 is one that Christ himself utilized, instead “[t]he armor ... is nothing more than a symbolic description of the Lord himself. The armor is *Christ*—and what He is prepared to be and to accomplish in our lives.” Ray Stedman, *Spiritual Warfare: How to Stand Firm in the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1999), 99. Notably, Arnold does justice to not only the Christological emphasis Paul likely had in mind, but the pneumatological as well when he writes: “Apart from Christ, the odds are clearly against us. We cannot live the lives Christ calls us to live. We need to depend on the empowering presence of God himself through his Holy Spirit. Paul thus prayed for the Ephesians that God would ‘strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being’ (Eph. 3:16),” Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Lincoln, 442; O’Brien, 462.

<sup>31</sup> O’Brien, 463.

in repeatedly.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Paul seems to have been calling for a *spirituality* that enables the followers of Christ, through the work of Christ’s Spirit, to embody in themselves the virtues and behaviors that Jesus himself embodied in his life and ministry.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, it appears that the rather profound transformational dynamic Paul keeps referring to in his letters is not automatic; some cooperation on the part of the disciple is required.<sup>34</sup> *This would suggest that, for an exposition of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion to prove to be genuinely impactful, the need for church members to not only hear but also heed Paul’s call to arms, and to do so in an ongoing manner, must be emphasized.*

Another difference-making matter related to this initial section of Paul’s epistle-ending discussion concerns his reference to the “devil” and his “devices.” Paul elaborates a bit more in succeeding verses about the need to take the devil seriously. What is striking here is the somewhat casual manner Paul gets that discussion started.

For sure, Paul had referred to the devil already in this letter (4:7). He had also encouraged his readers to take care, since the era in which they were living was earmarked by a

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<sup>32</sup> Mitton points out that while the imperative to *put on* is in the aorist tense, suggesting a definitive decision at a particular point in time, the present tense of the call to *be strong* “means that the ‘empowerment is a continuing, day by day, moment by moment, experience.’” (Mitton, 220.) See also Foulkes, 170.

<sup>33</sup> See Barth, 762. For more on a Christian spirituality that centers in the intentional cultivation of an empowering moment-by-moment mentoring relationship with the risen Christ, see Gary Tyra, *Christ’s Empowering Presence: The Pursuit of God through the Ages* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Even Stedman, who interprets the armor of God as Christ himself, goes on to refer to some responsibility on the part of Christ’s followers: “When Paul speaks of these various pieces of armor, he is speaking of Christ and how we are to *regard Him* and *lay hold of His power* as a defense against the strategies of the devil. It is not merely Christ as he is made available to us, but Christ as we have actually *appropriated Him* for our lives.” (See Stedman, 99, emphasis added.) Likewise, O’Brien provides a balanced perspective that’s informed by earlier portions of the Ephesian letter when he states: “The fundamental reason for this confidence (though not presumption) is that the decisive victory over the powers has already been won by God in Christ (1:19-22; cf. 4:8). . . . Believers live in the overlap of the ages, between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ Christ is already seated in the heavenly places far above every rule and authority; God has placed all things under his feet (1:21, 22), and we have been raised and made to sit with him (2:5, 6). But Christians need to appropriate what has been won for them, and in the present context this means putting on the armour of God and standing firm in the midst of the battle.” O’Brien, 464-65. See also *ibid.*, 481. For a similar discussion, see Lincoln, 442-43; Hoehner, 822, 832; Mitton, 221-22.

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preponderance of “evil” (5:7). In addition, he had referred multiple times to the phenomenon of spiritual *darkness* (4:18; 5:8; 5:11). These prior references, by themselves, might explain the reason why Paul could refer to the devil in 6:10 in a somewhat cavalier manner. But Acts 19 presents us with another possibility. This chapter describes Paul’s initial ministry visit to Ephesus. Acts 19:11-20 seem to suggest that at least some of the members of the church in Ephesus may have been, prior to their conversion, familiar with the occult. Indeed, New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold makes a compelling argument for the view that at least some of the disciples in Ephesus had once worshipped pagan deities and engaged in magical practices.<sup>35</sup> This too might explain why Paul didn’t have to frontload his “armor of God” discussion with a rationale for the devil’s reality. His readers didn’t need it!

However, the truth is that some of the folks attending our churches just might need such a discussion. In fact, they may need it over and over again! I’m reminded of the French poet Charles Baudelaire’s observation: “The devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.”<sup>36</sup> I’ve found that, given our contemporary Western culture’s sense of ambivalence regarding the reality of personal evil, God gets the blame for nearly everything bad that happens. Time and again I’ve had to remind hurting, confused, disappointed, angry parishioners and students that *it’s never just us and God; we simply must factor the devil into the equation!* I’ll have more to say about this topic when discussing Ephesians 6:12-13, but it’s worth stating here that *a presentation of Paul’s “armor of God” teaching that’s going to be catalytic will require an audience that understands the need to take the reality of the evil one seriously.* As C.S. Lewis famously observed:

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<sup>35</sup> Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> See Charles Baudelaire, *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76.

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.<sup>37</sup>

We must do our best to help our parishioners achieve the balanced perspective with respect to the devil that Lewis recommended. This is perhaps step-one in the process of providing congregants with the spiritual endurance training this paper is advocating for!

Going forward, a third-difference making issue related to Paul’s call to arms derives from the way he goes on to refer to the devil’s “devices.” It’s not unusual for scholars to comment on the fact that the Greek word translated as “devices”—*methodeía*—connotes the idea of clever, insidious, deceitful scheming.<sup>38</sup> But, while many commentators draw attention to the way Paul in Ephesians 4:26-27 warns against the devil’s use of interpersonal alienation to gain a foothold into church members’ lives,<sup>39</sup> only some elaborate a bit more on the various ways Satan seeks to wreak havoc in the lives of Christ’s followers.<sup>40</sup> While not intended to be exhaustive, I will offer the following short-list of Satanic stratagems I believe church members need to be aware of lest they be outwitted by the evil one (see 2 Cor 2:11): *seduction* (Mt. 4:8-9); *deception* (2 Cor. 11:2-5, 13-15); *alienation* (Eph. 4:26-27); *intimidation* (Rev. 2:10, 13); *distraction* (Mt. 16:21-23); *hesitation* (Acts 4:34–5:11); and *accusation/condemnation* (Rev. 12:10). A sufficient treatment of these satanic devices, which would include an indication of the aspect of Christian discipleship each one targets, would require a separate essay. Here I’ll simply indicate that *I’ve*

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<sup>37</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), ix.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Barth, 763, Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 118.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see Hoehner, 824, Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 118.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Foulkes, 176; Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL, 2001), 38-39; Jerry Rankin, *Spiritual Warfare: The Battle for God’s Glory* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 6-23, 25-80, 165-226.

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*found that drawing the attention of church members to the variety of ways the devil seeks their undoing spiritually, morally, and missionally is another way to increase the existential impact of a contemporary presentation of Paul’s “armor of God” teaching.*

### **The Nature of the Struggle (6:12-13)**

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>{13}</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Eph 6:12-13)

There are several issues related to these two verses I feel the need to address. How our church members understand what Paul was saying about the *personal, supernatural, already/not yet,* and *definitive* nature of the struggle against evil will also determine the degree to which they take his “armor of God” teaching seriously.

First, the Greek word translated “struggle” (*palē*) connotes the idea of a wrestling match—close-up, hand-to-hand combat with an opponent.<sup>41</sup> Scholars comment on how peculiar it was for Paul to shift the imagery from that of a Roman soldier to an athlete competing in a very popular sporting contest.<sup>42</sup> One explanation is that Paul was at pains to have his readers understand how personal and rigorous the spiritual conflict to which he’s referring actually is.<sup>43</sup>

*We must help our congregants understand that, though the communal aspect of spiritual warfare will be addressed by Paul later on in this discussion (see 6:18-20), the call to arms being sounded in these verses is one each individual Christian disciple must give some serious attention to!*

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<sup>41</sup> See Barth, 763; O’Brien, 465-66; Hoehner, 825.

<sup>42</sup> For example, see O’Brien, 465.

<sup>43</sup> See Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 37-38; Foulkes, 172.



Second, Paul also seemed to be eager to let his readers know that the true enemies of all Christian disciples are not blood and flesh, but “evil, supernatural powers under the control of the god of his world.”<sup>44</sup> *Another reason why Paul’s readers should take his call to arms seriously is the formidable, supernatural nature of the conflict!* As Clinton Arnold explains, “[t]he opponents Paul emphasizes here are demonic forces. Rather than simply saying ‘demons,’ he uses a series of four terms to characterize these forces: *archai* (principalities); *exousiai* (authorities); *kosmokratores* (world rulers); *pneumatika* (spiritual forces).<sup>45</sup>

A controversy derives from the fact that while a majority of scholars understand Paul to have believed that “these powers of evil are personal, demonic intelligences,”<sup>46</sup> others demythologize these powers, identifying them as “structures of thought,” “human traditions and sociopolitical structures,” “impersonal forces which determine human existence.”<sup>47</sup> For his part, Peter O’Brien, argues against this demythologizing of the spiritual powers, pointing out that this interpretive move “fails to do justice to the historical context of the New Testament in which belief in the spiritual realm was widespread” and “does not adequately account for explicit statements about these powers in Paul and other New Testament writers.”<sup>48</sup> For my part, I tend to agree with those scholars who, while they affirm the ability of “human institutions and social structures to work evil among humanity,” also acknowledge the “strong personal supernatural

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<sup>44</sup> O’Brien, 465; Hoehner, 828-29. As has already been indicated, Arnold contends that at least some of the disciples in Ephesus had once worshipped pagan deities and engaged in magical practices. Therefore, in Ephesians 6:10-20 we find Paul emphasizing the very real need for spiritual warfare in light of this. See, Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 67.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 38.

<sup>46</sup> O’Brien, 469. See also Mitton, 221; Powlison, 91; Foulkes, 172.

<sup>47</sup> O’Brien, 469. See also Walter Wink, “The World Systems Model” in *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views*, James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds. (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2012), 57-60.

<sup>48</sup> O’Brien, 469.

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dimension” to the Christian’s spiritual struggle, and the fact that “the personal-spiritual dimension seems to be Paul’s primary focus in Ephesians 6:10-20.”<sup>49</sup> Arnold concludes his

helpful summary of the “supernatural opponents” Christian disciples face thusly:

Why, then, does Paul line up these four terms rather than simply say, “Our struggle is against evil spirits”? I think he does so for persuasive effect. He wants to wake believers up to the fact that the struggle is not over now that we are Christians. The struggle continues and there are all sorts of mighty demonic spirits intent on bringing our demise.”<sup>50</sup>

*So, the difference-making take-away is this: while we can and should encourage church members to acknowledge the ability of evil to work through historical, this worldly, societal customs and institutions, we must also emphasize that it’s because our struggle is ultimately supernatural in nature—involving a very serious conflict with a host of evil spiritual entities—that we need to take very seriously the call for us to “put on the full armor of God”!*<sup>51</sup>

A third matter related to the nature of our spiritual struggle that needs to be addressed is one of timing. Paul indicates in verse 13 that the full armor of God will prove to be indispensable “when the day of evil comes.” Once again, the scholastic community is divided on how best to understand the nature of the “day of evil” referred to here.<sup>52</sup> Was Paul referring to an

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<sup>49</sup> For example, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL., 1997), 271-76; Ed Murphy, 407-408.

<sup>50</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> It’s not unusual for works that essentially equate spiritual warfare with casting out demons to devote a lot of space to ranking and differentiating between the spiritual enemies Paul refers to in verse 12, while leaving the rest of Ephesians 6:10-20 largely untreated. For example, in an otherwise interesting and helpful book titled *The Evangelicals’ Guide to Spiritual Warfare*, the only verse from Ephesians 6:10-20 the author refers to specifically is verse 12 (see, Kraft, 84, 90, 95, 103, 114, 124-25, 151-53, 235, 239)!

<sup>52</sup> An attitude of scholarly ambivalence is especially notable in Barth’s treatment of this topic. Barth, 765; see also Hoehner, 834. For a thorough discussion of the various options of what Paul in mind when he referred to the “evil day,” see Lincoln, 445-46. For his part, Muddiman interprets the “evil day” in a thoroughly eschatological manner: the evil day refers to “the last outbreak of Satan’s apostasy” (cf. 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Thess 5:2; Rev 20:1-10. (See Muddiman, 290.) Arnold likewise sees value in the view that the “evil day” is an eschatological season of increased diabolical activity because of impending judgment on the day of the Lord (cf. Eph 5:16). (See Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 113) Mitton, not sensing an eschatological focus in Ephesians, leans more toward the idea that

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eschatological, cosmic day of evil yet in the future, or did he have in mind seasons of especially intense spiritual conflict that occur at various times in the course of one’s walk with Christ, or does his “armor of God” discussion have relevance for Christians in their everyday lives? Once again, I’m in favor of a more comprehensive option which Clinton Arnold seems to have in mind when, keeping the rest of the letter to the Ephesians in mind, he writes:

The struggle is a daily affair.... Paul urged the Ephesians to make the most of every opportunity, “because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). This was a reminder to his friends that they live in the present evil age. This is not the time to settle down and relax. This is a time for mission and doing the work of the kingdom. Here Paul explicitly encourages the Ephesians to prepare spiritually so they can resist their opponent “when the day evil comes” (Eph. 6:13). Yes, all days are evil in the sense that we do not yet live in fullness of the age to come. There are certain periods of time, however, when Christians face a flurry of terrible difficulties or when temptation seems to come with unusual power.<sup>53</sup>

*The take-away here is huge: the members of our churches need to be encouraged to believe that spiritual warfare is an ongoing reality that all of us have been, are, and will continue to experience. Though the Bible seems to suggest that the intensity of this supernatural conflict may increase as the time of Christ’s return draws near (e.g., see Rev. 2:10-11; cf. 12:12) we must not defer our getting serious about putting on the armor of God to a later time. Indeed, an argument could be made for the idea that one’s ability to function in the armor of God then is very much dependent upon our being careful to learn how to do so now!*

A final difference-making issue related to the nature of the struggle concerns the admonishment found in Ephesians 6:13 to “stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” *What did Paul have in mind when he suggested that the goal of the believer’s engagement in spiritual warfare is to “stand”?* Keeping in mind the concern for moral

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any day can be the evil day. (See Mitton, 224.) Schnackenburg is representative of the more comprehensive, both/and or all-of-the-above view. See Schnackenburg, 276. See also Foulkes, 173.

<sup>53</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 38.

integrity Paul has evidenced earlier in this letter (e.g., 4:1, 17-32), it would be easy to conclude that, for Paul, to stand firm is simply to avoid the temptation to sin. But Paul also evidenced a concern in this letter that the Ephesian disciples stand firm in the sense of not being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (4:14; cf. Col 2:1-8).<sup>54</sup> Moreover, we can also find in Paul’s letters calls for his readers to stand firm in a missional sense—to remain fruitfully engaged in kingdom ministry (e.g., 1 Cor 15:58; Phil 1:27). Finally, there is at least one Pauline passage which seems to call for readers to stand firm in all three of the ways referred to above—i.e., spiritually, morally, and missionally (Phil 3:15–4:3).<sup>55</sup> So, which is it? *Just how definitive, and in what manner definitive, did Paul consider the spiritual struggle described in his “armor of God” discussion to be?*

I suspect that the theological presuppositions scholars bring to this complex exegetical question tremendously affects the way they answer it. Reading through the literature one finds many scholars simply taking for granted that all Paul has in mind in his Ephesians 6:13 call to “stand firm” is that his readers let God help them avoid sinning, or perhaps remain steadfastly engaged in ministry.<sup>56</sup> However, Paul’s letters contain several passages which seem to warn of the possibility of spiritual apostasy, and/or encourage an avoidance of it.<sup>57</sup> While I obviously can’t speak for Paul, I can verify that some interpreters suspect that the way he referred in

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<sup>54</sup> Other passages found in the Pauline corpus which indicate Paul’s concern that his disciples stand firm in their faith include such passages as 1 Cor 16:13; 2 Cor 1:24; Gal 5:1; Col 2:6-7; and 2 Thess 2:13, 15.

<sup>55</sup> For an expanded list of Pauline passages which exhort the reader to stand or remain steadfast, see Lincoln, 449; O’Brien, 473n137.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see Muddiman, 288, Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 118, 119.

<sup>57</sup> For example, see Ro 11:17-22; 1 Cor 9:24–10:12; 15:1-2; 16:13; 2 Cor 1:24; 11:2-3; Gal 4:8-20; 5:2-6; Col 1:21-23; Col 2:1-8; 1 Thess 3:5; 1 Tim 1:18-19; 3:6-7; 4:1-10; 5:8; 6:9-12, 20-21; 2 Tim 2:11-13; 2:16-21; 4:7-8.

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Romans 5:1-2 to the believer’s *faith* in Christ serving as the *access* into grace, could invest those Pauline passages which exhort readers to *stand firm in the faith* with some soteriological significance (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9; 2 Pet 3:17-18). In other words, though not all commentators will allow for this, I believe we must at least allow for the possibility that standing firm in Paul’s mind was definitive in an ultimate, soteriological (salvation-experiencing) sense.<sup>58</sup> *Obviously, encouraging church members to even consider this possibility would make for a presentation that’s supremely high in terms of its existential impact!* However, since Paul also penned some passages which are often interpreted as suggesting that standing firm is something God guarantees without any human cooperation (e.g., 2 Cor 1:21-22), and since the opening verses of his letter to the Ephesians (1:1-14) have likewise been interpreted in such a way as to suggest that the *indicatives* (indications of *blessing*) announced by Paul in the first half of the letter (1:1–3:21) mitigate the soteriological significance of the *imperatives* (indications of *responsibility*) pronounced in the second half (4:1–6:20), I understand why some commentators and preaching pastors might choose to interpret Paul’s emphasis on standing firm as definitive for Christian experience in a less than supreme sense.<sup>59</sup> I want to suggest that, perhaps, the best course of action when it comes to issues like this is to provide our parishioners with the biblical-supported possibilities, and encourage them to prayerfully respond to Paul’s “armor of God” discussion with the degree of intensity Christ’s Spirit seems to be calling for from them. *Seriously, I’ve found that the existential impact my students or church members experience is most significant when they feel they’re being responsive to a personal call from Christ.* Though taking this tack

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<sup>58</sup> Schnackenburg seems to at least flirt with this idea. See Schnackenburg, 271, 278-79, 285.

<sup>59</sup> For example, though Arnold is bold to suggest that “[v]ictory is not necessarily assured in this struggle,” and that “[w]ithout appropriating the armor of God, the believer is not equipped to resist the influence of the ‘powers,’” he only means that it’s possible for believers to be seduced into sinning, thereby giving ground to the devil and grieving the Spirit of God (Eph 4:30). (See Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 118-120; also Powlison, 98.)

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may seem odd or even dangerous to some church leaders, we would do well, I insist, to always be encouraging our congregants to take some personal responsibility for what they sense the risen Christ calling them to as they prayerfully seek to discern his heart through his word, his Spirit, and the confirmation or lack thereof they experience in Christian community.

*In any case, it's clear from Paul's collective writings that he was concerned that Christian disciples remain ever faithful in terms of their spirituality, morality, and missionality.<sup>60</sup> We can and should, therefore, be diligent in boldly teaching that Paul believed that putting on the full armor of God is key to this occurring. I suspect that, virtually all church members would say that they want to someday hear Jesus say to them: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt 25:21, 23, emphasis added). Thus, a focus from the pulpit on the way the Scriptures connect standing firm and the threefold faithfulness Christ not only embodied for us, but is looking for in us, should be an effective way of motivating significant numbers of our congregants to take Ephesians 6:10-20 seriously.*

### **The Nature of the Armor/Weaponry (6:14-17)**

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>{15}</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>{16}</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>{17}</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph 6:14-17)

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<sup>60</sup> Though he doesn't use the terms per se, Arnold indicates how important each of these forms of faithfulness are to God's will for his people. He goes on to make two important points: First, it's due to the importance of what I refer to as the “threefold faithfulness” that we should expect the devil to oppose its cultivation and maintenance in a fierce manner! Second, it's by continually being filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18) that “[w]e find our strength in the presence of the indwelling Lord, who empowers us to stand against the devil's schemes.” Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 41-42

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In the next four verses of Paul’s *peroratio*-plus he continues his overarching call to stand firm, indicating in them the way his readers are to do so. And, in this section, too, we come across several difference-making issues.

First, as I have indicated already, I side with those scholars who suggest that it’s best not to read too much into the armor rhetoric employed in this passage. The better method is to seek to discern the meaning of each prescribed virtue/behavior by examining how Paul referred to it elsewhere in his letter to the Ephesians, and the other epistles that make up the Pauline corpus. *I’ve found that thoughtful church members appreciate presentations that portray Paul as a thoughtful pastor/theologian whose writings, though sometimes difficult to follow, actually evidence a profound consistency. Enabling church members to recognize the thematic consistency inherent in Paul’s “armor of God” discussion will not only serve to make it more coherent; it will make it more compelling as well!*

Second, another choice a preaching pastor must make is between an interpretation which insists that the armor is for defensive purposes only,<sup>61</sup> and one which suggests that the whole armor of God was meant to represent the “full and complete equipment of a soldier with weapons of offense and defense.”<sup>62</sup> This issue corresponds with one we have already discussed: how Paul understood the dynamic of standing firm. Thus, I suspect that a commentator’s (and preacher’s) take on the nature of the armor/weaponry prescribed by Paul depends upon whether he or she understands Paul’s concern to have been the maintenance of orthodox opinion, moral integrity, or missional impact. In other words, the crucial question is: *Were Paul’s exhortations designed to encourage his readers to withstand the temptation to defect from or syncretize the*

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see Foulkes, 171; Dean and Ice, 154, 157.

<sup>62</sup> See Mitton, 221. See also Powlison, 96; Murphy, 408.

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*Christian faith (cf. Jude 3), to stand firm in the face of any temptations toward moral compromise, or to continue to do damage to the devil by engaging in a Spirit-empowered missional ministry.* Once again, I contend that because all these interpretive perspectives possess merit, it's unnecessary to choose between them. I suggest that back of the six exhortations presented in Ephesians 6:14-17 was a concern that Christian disciples allow the Holy Spirit help them cultivate and maintain the spiritual faithfulness that's essential to the moral faithfulness that's crucial to the missional faithfulness God desires and deserves. *Thus, I believe that a more compelling presentation of this text occurs when we explain to our parishioners that, though the way Paul describes the function of the various pieces of armor seems to be more defensive rather than offensive, he knew that the ultimate result of our putting on this armor will be the cultivation and maintenance of a lifestyle that not only resists the devil but routs him as well (see Rom 16:20; 2 Cor 10:3-5).*<sup>63</sup>

A final difference-making decision a preaching pastor must make is whether Paul intended the virtues of truth, righteousness, faith, and salvation to be understood in an objective or subjective sense. For example, when he referred to the "belt of truth," was Paul exhorting his readers to maintain their embrace of the truth inherent in the gospel of Jesus Christ, or for them to subjectively become people of integrity who consistently traffic in the truth?<sup>64</sup> Again, because of the way a Christian disciple's moral faithfulness emerges from his or her spiritual faithfulness, as well as the way behaviors are linked to beliefs, I suggest that, perhaps, Paul had both in mind. Indeed, this may explain why, from our perspective at least, Paul seems to have enunciated the exhortations relating to these divine virtues in such an ambiguous manner. The idea that

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<sup>63</sup> For more on this, see n97.

<sup>64</sup> See Barth, 767-68.



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interpreters and preachers should embrace rather than evade the ambiguity produced by a both/and interpretive choice finds some support from New Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln who opines:

The qualities to which the various pieces of armor point are used rather generally and loosely and cannot always be pinned down precisely. The interpreter has to attempt to discover *an acceptable range of meaning* from the context and the use of the terms elsewhere in the letter.<sup>65</sup>

More and more, I’m finding that thoughtful church members will not only tolerate but will appreciate a teaching pastor’s being forthright about the ambiguity inherent in some biblical passages. I’ve also found that there’s something wonderfully compelling about teachings which help congregants understand that the theological indicatives described by Paul early in his letters were never meant to even be heard, much less understood, apart from the moral and ministry imperatives he prescribed in the latter part of his missives! *Paul was all about helping the members of his churches learn to live in the tension between the indicatives (blessings) and imperatives (responsibilities). We can and should do the same, especially when presenting his “armor of God” teaching.*

Now, with the preceding overview of issues in place, the table presented below summarizes the exhortation I associate with each of the six pieces of armor/weaponry referred to in Ephesians 6:14-17. The reader will note that this interpretation: (1) seeks to do justice to the importance Paul placed on the Holy Spirit in Christian experience;<sup>66</sup> (2) evidences the

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<sup>65</sup> Lincoln, 448, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> The idea that it’s God’s armor, which was also worn by Jesus, that’s now available to Christ’s followers, implies a pneumatological provision (cf. Jn 16:14-15). Paul essentially says as much in his prayer for his Ephesian readers: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being . . .” (Eph 3:16). Moreover, since the call to put on the armor of God seems to parallel the call in 4:24 to put on the new self, and the exhortation in 5:18 to continually be being filled with the Holy Spirit, it would certainly seem that Paul had in mind an on-going experience of Spirit-empowerment (see n98.)

importance and dynamic interplay of the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness Jesus wants to enable his followers to cultivate and maintain; and (3) takes very seriously the notion that the prescribed virtues can and should be understood in both their objective and subjective senses— i.e., as divine realities that are to be *embraced* and then, with the help of Christ’s Spirit, *embodied*. The rationale for my interpretation of each exhortation will be provided by means of the biblical passages referenced parenthetically after each exhortation, and in a series of especially dense explanatory footnotes which indicate some scholarly support and dissent.

<b>The Six “Armor of God” Exhortations in Ephesians 6:14-17</b>	
<i>Virtue/Behavior</i>	<i>Exhortation</i>
<b>Truth</b>	Disciples are to resist the devil by proactively cooperating with the Spirit’s desire to help them maintain a sturdy embrace of the truth of the gospel over against all religious and philosophical alternatives, and then to embody that truth in every aspect of their lives (see Is 11:5; Eph 1:13; 4:14-15, 20-21; 5:8-10). <sup>67</sup>
<b>Righteousness</b>	Disciples are to resist the devil by allowing the knowledge of their <i>positional righteousness in Christ</i> to motivate them to, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, pursue a <i>practical righteousness for Christ</i> , thereby depriving the enemy of any opportunity to gain a foothold in their lives (see Is 59:17 [cf. 11:5; Wisdom of Solomon 5:18]; Rom 3:21-26; 6:13; Eph 4:24; 5:1, 8-9). <sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Though some commentators insist that Paul only had objective truth in mind here (e.g., Dean and Ice, 158; Rankin, 259), and others suggest rather that Paul only had subjective truth in view (e.g., Foulkes, 174), O’Brien offers that “[a]s believers buckle on this piece of the Messiah’s armour [cf. Is. 11:4-5], they will be strengthened by God’s truth revealed in the gospel, as a consequence of which they will display the characteristics of the Anointed One [i.e., Messiah or Christ] in their attitudes, language, and behaviour. In this way they resist the devil, giving him no opportunity to gain an advantage over them.” (O’Brien, 474.) Likewise, Muddiman is open to a both/and interpretation, suggesting that “[t]he indeterminacy is probably deliberate: it allows for a variety of applications for the paraenesis.” See Muddiman, 290-91. See also Barth, 767-68; Hoehner, 839-40; Schnackenburg, 277; Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 110; Murphy, 410.

<sup>68</sup> While Rankin is adamant that the righteousness here is God’s not the believer’s (see Rankin, 259-60), Arnold’s interpretation focuses entirely on the responsibility of believers to “turn away from sin, to confess it (1 Jn 1:9), and to ask God to strengthen them to resist.” (See Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 125.)

<p><b>Readiness of the Gospel of Peace</b></p>	<p>Disciples, filled with a peace that transcends all understanding, are to resist and do damage to the devil by boldly sharing the Christian gospel of peace by means of Spirit-prompted, Christ-honoring, mercy-saturated, peace-producing words and actions, thereby embodying a primary earmark of God’s kingdom come and coming in a missionally impactful manner (see Is 52:7 [cf. Rom 10:14-15]; Eph 2:13-22; 4:1-3 [cf. Col 3:15-16]; Tit 3:1-2; 2 Tim 2:20-21; Phil 4:7; Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22-23).<sup>69</sup></p>
<p><b>Faith</b></p>	<p>Disciples are to resist and do damage to the devil by proactively nurturing a personal faith in the risen Christ’s faithfulness that makes them impervious to any temptation to syncretize, sin, or keep silent (see Ps 7:10; Eph 3:16-19; 4:11-13; 6:23-24; Col 1:21-22; 2:4-8); 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Thess 5:23-34; 2 Thess 3:3-4.<sup>70</sup></p>

Likewise, Lincoln is fairly insistent that “[t]his is not the justifying righteousness of Rom 3:21-26 . . . but an ethical quality.” (See Lincoln, 448. See also Foulkes, 174-75.) And yet, some ambivalence about whether to interpret this exhortation as an indicative or imperative causes other commentators to see it as both. For example, see O’Brien, 473-75; Barth, 796-97; Hoehner, 840-41; Murphy, 408; Dean and Ice, 160-61.

<sup>69</sup> Unlike Francis Foulkes (see Foulkes, 175), most scholars suggest that the virtue to be focused on here is not the feeling of peace the disciple enjoys due to his embrace of the gospel (see Rom 5:1), but a “readiness” Paul associates with the gospel of peace (see Is 52:7; Rom 10:14-15). Though the Greek noun translated as “readiness”—*hetoimasia*—doesn’t occur elsewhere in the New Testament, various versions of it do occur in Pauline passages which encourage Christian disciples to be “ready” to engage in good works (e.g., Titus 3:1; 2 Tim 2:21). Moreover, Ephesians 4:1-3 connects the experience of peace and the dynamic of Christian community (cf. Col 3:15). It’s a possibility, then, that in 6:15 Paul is referring not only to a readiness to preach the gospel of peace (see O’Brien, 478; Muddiman, 285-86; 291; Mitton, 225-226; Murphy, 410-11; Rankin, 260), but also to proactively engage in the cultivation of an ecclesial community earmarked by peace (see Schnackenburg, 278). Such a community would do damage to the devil by providing for outsiders a winsome witness to the reality of God’s kingdom through a demonstration of an essential attribute of it (cf. Rom 14:17). Some implicit support for a connection between a healthy Christian community and the “spreading of the good news of Christ to others” is provided by Arnold (see Arnold, 3 *Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 41) and Gregory Boyd, “The Ground Level Deliverance Model” in *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2012), 154. Moreover, this interpretation also finds some (unintended) support from Lincoln who asserts that a readiness to promote the peace and harmony the gospel produces, which serves now as a “pledge of future cosmic harmony (cf. 1:10; 3:10) . . . sounds the death knell for opposing cosmic powers. . . .” (See Lincoln, 448-49).

<sup>70</sup> Lincoln maintains that the faith referred to here “is the confident trust in and receptiveness to Christ and his power that protects the whole person. . . . Faith takes hold of God’s resources in the midst of the onslaughts of evil and produces the firm resolve which douses anything the enemy throws at the believer (cf. 1 Thess 5:8 where faith is part of the breastplate, and 1 Pet 5:8.9 where firm faith is necessary for resisting the devil.” (See Lincoln, 449. See also O’Brien, 479; Foulkes, 176; Murphy 411; Rankin, 260.) Barth argues that it’s the Messiah’s faithfulness that protects, brings victory (Barth, 773), but he also acknowledges that Hebrews 11:32-34 links the believers’ faith to victory over temptation (Ibid. 774). Hoehner also places Paul’s focus on the subjective faith of believers (see Hoehner, 846), while Schnackenburg holds that “Faith is the basic power provided by God (cf. Col 1:23) to enable us to resist the assaults of the devil (cf. 1 Pet 5:9)” (See Schnackenburg, 278.) Thus, a focus on the believer’s faith in the faithfulness of Christ seems to do justice to Christian faith in both its subjective and objective forms. Muddiman likewise endorses this both/and interpretation. See Muddiman, 293.

<p><b>Hope of Salvation</b></p>	<p>Disciples are to resist and do damage to the devil by proactively cultivating a personal spirituality that enables them to keep their eyes on the prize (of which the Spirit is a down payment), thereby becoming impervious to the enemy’s attempts at engendering within them the discipleship-defeating attitudes of disappointment, discouragement, distraction, doubt, and despair (see Is 59:17; 1 Thess 5:8; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Rom 5:1-5; 8:14-17, 23-25; 15:13).<sup>71</sup></p>
<p><b>Word of God</b></p>	<p>Disciples are to resist and do damage to the devil by obeying the Spirit’s promptings to speak the word of God in a prophetic manner to themselves, the devil, and others in an evangelizing, edifying, and equipping manner (see Eph. 5:18-20; Col. 3:16-17; Mt 4:1-11 = Lk 4:1-13; 1 Cor. 14:3, 29-31).<sup>72</sup></p>

It’s my hope that this table enables the reader of this paper to gain a helpful overview of an interpretation of the six exhortations presented in Paul’s “armor of God” discussion that strives to be both responsible and life-story shaping. And yet, well known is the fact that what one

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<sup>71</sup> Barth suggests that “most likely” this exhortation had “a ‘helmet of victory’ in mind which is more ornate than a battle helmet and demonstrates that the battle has been won; the saints are to ‘take’ this helmet as a gift from God. They go into battle and stand the heat of the day in full confidence of the outcome, with no uncertainty in their minds; for they wear the same battle-proven helmet which God straps on his head (according to the original meaning of Isa 59:17).” (Barth, 775-76. See also Lincoln, 450-51; Murphy, 411; Hoehner, 848-50; Muddiman, 293; Foulkes, 176; Rankin, 260.) Again, taking seriously the possibility that Paul’s embrace of the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility might warrant it, this interpretation seeks to do justice to Christ’s sufficiency and the disciple’s need to nurture a devil-defeating, life-story shaping reliance upon it. Also, Lincoln provides some unintended support for an aspect of my interpretation of the helmet’s function when he refers to “every type of assault devised by the evil one, not just temptation to impure or unloving conduct but also false teaching, persecution, doubt, and despair.” (See Lincoln, 450.) Finally, we should take note of how Romans 15:13 refers to an experience of hope that’s Spirit-enabled.

<sup>72</sup> O’Brien emphasizes the role of the Spirit in making the sword (Word of God) “powerful and effective. (O’Brien, 482.) Likewise, Arnold asserts: “Here the preaching of the gospel is depicted as the most aggressive maneuver against the realm of the devil and his hosts by the employment of the use of the sword as the final weapon in the enumeration.” (Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 120.) Other scholars consider it significant that the Greek noun translated as “word” in 6:17 is not *logos* but *rhema*. In the process, they suggest that Paul had in mind here a prophetic use of the word of God in the context of spiritual warfare. (I will elaborate upon the way these scholars connect Paul’s reference to the Spirit and *rhema* in such a way as to suggest a prophetic dynamic in the next section of the paper.) However, it should be noted that Hoehner’s interpretation, which focuses almost entirely on Jesus’ use of the word of God to resist the temptations put to him by the devil in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11 = Lk 4:1-13), leads him to insist that its purpose is not evangelistic at all, but merely a form of self-preservation. (See Hoehner, 852-53; see also Foulkes, 176-77; Dean and Ice, 164; Rankin 260; Chip Ingram, *The Invisible War: What Every Believer Needs to Know about Satan, Demons, and Spiritual Warfare* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015], 159-61.)

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scholar refers to as the “classic spiritual warfare passage” doesn’t end here.<sup>73</sup> Two more very important sections remain to be treated.

### **The Call to Prayer (6:18)**

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. (Eph 6:18)

Having indicated the important role the Holy Spirit plays in the effective use of the word of God, Paul immediately exhorts his readers toward a dynamic, *Spirit-enabled* engagement in prayer as well. This back-to-back reference to the Holy Spirit is suggestive of how important Paul considered the Spirit to be to a successful engagement in spiritual warfare. It makes sense, then, that an interpretation of Ephesians 6:10-20 which strives to be Spirit-sensitive will devote a bit of extra space to its treatment of the call to prayer presented in it.

### ***The Importance of Prayer to Spiritual Warfare***

To begin, while only some commentators consider the exhortation to pray in Eph 6:18 to be a seventh piece of armor,<sup>74</sup> nearly all suggest that it’s critical to Paul’s “armor of God” discussion.<sup>75</sup> After asserting that “[p]rayer is the heart of spiritual warfare,” Clinton Arnold goes on to offer this clarification: “The seventh weapon in the believer’s arsenal listed by Paul is prayer (Eph. 6:18). It is not seventh in importance, however. It is actually foundational to deploying all of the other weapons. Prayer is the essence and mode of spiritual warfare.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 37, 120. See also Powlison, 92.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 43; Boyd, *God at War*, 281-82. Gregory Brown, *The Armor of God: Standing Firm in Spiritual Warfare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (BTG Publishing, 2017), 91-92. See also *ibid.*, 129.

<sup>75</sup> For example, see Lincoln, 430-31, 451-52, 457; O’Brien, 483-84; Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 112; Foulkes, 177; Murphy, 412; Ingram, 175; C. Mark Cortis, *The Truth about Spiritual Warfare: Your Place in the Battle between God and Satan* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 91.

<sup>76</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 43-44. See also Barth, 777.

### ***What It Means to Pray in the Spirit***

While I very much agree with this assessment of the critical importance of prayer to Paul’s “armor of God” discussion, I’m somewhat disappointed at how few scholars describe what it means to pray *in the Spirit* in a way that reflects Paul’s pneumatologically real understanding and practice of it.<sup>77</sup> For example, though John Muddiman refers to prayer as “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” citing Paul (Rom 8:15) in the process, the conclusion he draws from this verse is that it’s the Spirit “who inspires all prayer (cf. Rom 8:16, 26f).”<sup>78</sup> Now, while this assertion certainly pays attention to the importance of the Spirit to Christian prayer, taken by itself it can prompt the notion that Paul taught that *since the Spirit inspires all prayer, all prayer is necessarily prayer in the Spirit*. A main argument for this reductionistic perspective says that, for Paul, the alternative to praying in the Spirit would likely be praying in the flesh (cf. Gal 5:16-17). Since the notion of praying in the flesh would be, for Paul, absurd, then he must have thought of all genuine prayer as occurring in or by the Spirit.<sup>79</sup>

In essential agreement with this view, other scholars insist that to pray in the Spirit is simply to pray constantly, variously, alertly, perseveringly, universally, biblically, etc.<sup>80</sup> In other words, the only thing that makes praying in the Spirit different is the especially intense or fervent manner it’s engaged in.

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<sup>77</sup> For example, see Barth, 778-79; Lincoln, 452; O’Brien, 484-85; Hoehner, 857; Schnackenburg, 281-82; Brown, 92; Murphy, 78.

<sup>78</sup> See Muddiman, 295.

<sup>79</sup> See Arthur Wallis, *Pray in the Spirit* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1970), 25. See also Foulkes, 178.

<sup>80</sup> For example, see Brown, 91–105. See also Brian Borgman and Rob Ventura, *Spiritual Warfare: A Biblical and Balanced Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 90-92; Joel R. Beeke, *Fighting Satan: Knowing His Weaknesses, Strategies, and Defeat* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 56-58.

To his credit, Clinton Arnold goes beyond this to speak of a special type of prayer that involves a significant amount of sensitivity to the Spirit. He explains that praying in the Spirit actually

refers to the Holy Spirit's work of guiding and directing us to pray for specific things. Paul calls us to cultivate a sensitivity to *what the Spirit may be prompting us for* and then how we should pray about it. Prayer is more than vocalizing a list of needs to God. Prayer involves asking God how we should pray and then acting on *the promptings and impressions the Spirit places on our minds*.<sup>81</sup>

In another place, Arnold comes even closer to a fully pneumatologically real (charismatic/prophetic) interpretation of praying in the Spirit when he writes:

Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to serve as a counselor and guide for us (John 14:16, 26; 15:26). Part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is in providing direction and guidance in how we pray (Eph. 6:18). As we seek to reach our community with the gospel or intercede for another country, we should begin by asking the Spirit how we should pray. This is at the basis of what some are calling "*prophetic intercession*." We listen to the Spirit and exercise sensitivity to what he impresses on us to pray for.<sup>82</sup>

Some support for the notion that there may be something *prophetic* about the way Paul understood what it means to pray in the Spirit derives from the way some scholars interpret what the apostle was insinuating in Ephesians 6:17 when he linked the "Spirit" and the "word of God." To be more specific, these scholars think it significant that Paul chose to use the word *rhema* in 6:17 rather than *logos* when referring to the "word" of God. This word choice, they suggest, indicates that Paul had in mind a Spirit-empowered or prophetic wielding of God's word. For example, Markus Barth explains:

The term *rhema* which here and in 5:26 denotes "word" means in Pauline diction a specifically weighty, be it creative, revelatory, *prophetic*, or otherwise binding pronouncement. Because of the parenthetical context, especially 4:25, 29, 5:13, 18-

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<sup>81</sup> Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, 46. See also, *ibid.*, 185, emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. See also Barth, 780, emphasis added.

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19, a reference to *prophetic* speech, to the singing of spiritual hymns, and to prayer (see vs. 18) cannot be excluded.<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, Leslie Mitton believes that the way Paul associates “word” and “Spirit” in 6:17 suggests that a prophetic dynamic was on his mind. Mitton writes:

In Paul’s writings those who spoke God’s word under the impulse of the Spirit were called *prophets*. It was their function not so much to recall and expound written words from the past as to *speak out what God was saying to them* in the present. “Thus says the Lord” was their characteristic utterance. The Spirit in a Christian can enable him to become *God’s spokesman to the situation in which he finds himself*. The Spirit *furnishes him with the word of God*, the spiritual sword in God’s advancing cause. In this cause the Spirit, it was believed, would provide the Christian with the word he needs to make an effective answer either as a witness or under interrogation: “The words you need will be given to you . . . It will be the Spirit of God speaking in you” (Mt 10:19-20).<sup>84</sup>

I contend that these passages, which suggest that there was something charismatic and prophetic about the way Paul envisioned the Ephesian disciples wielding the sword of the Spirit (word of God) in the context of spiritual warfare (Eph 6:17), open the door to a more charismatic/prophetic understanding of the type of praying Paul immediately called his readers to engage in (Eph 6:18).<sup>85</sup> *Why should we not at least consider the possibility that in Ephesians 6:18 Paul may have had this pneumatologically real (more explicitly charismatic and prophetic) understanding of praying in the Spirit in mind? Isn’t it possible that praying in the Spirit might involve not only a sensitivity to the Spirit, but the experience of the Spirit praying through us in a charismatic, prophetic manner?*

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<sup>83</sup> See Barth, 777, emphasis added.

<sup>84</sup> See Mitton, 227, emphasis added. For a more detailed discussion of the biblically-supported connection between the coming of the Spirit and the impartation of what I refer to as “prophetic capacity,” see Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission: Prophetic Speech and Action in Christian Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 39-101.

<sup>85</sup> As I will indicate below, these passages also possess significance for a pneumatologically real interpretation of Ephesians 6:19.



Gordon Fee certainly seemed to think so. Commenting on the way Paul included the phrase “in the Spirit” in Ephesians 6:18, Fee wrote:

There is every good reason to think that Paul intends this phrase as he has used it elsewhere—especially in 1 Cor 14:14-15 (cf. Rom 8:26-27)—to refer specifically to that form of prayer in which the Spirit assumes a special role in the praying, especially, though probably not exclusively, praying in tongues. In that passage Paul distinguishes between two forms of prayer: one he will do ‘with the mind’ and in the public assembly; the other he will do “in/by the Spirit” and in the privacy of his own life of devotion before God. If that catches some of us off guard because it is so little a part of the prayer life of most people in the church, we probably ought not to read our experience of church back into the life of Paul. What Paul says about this kind of praying in 1 Cor 14:1-5, 14-19 demonstrated that he engaged in it regularly, and that he urged the believers in Corinth to do so as well. The same is most likely true of Rom 8:26-27 (q.v.). If this more specific “praying in the Spirit” is in view, then one must also be prepared to enlarge one’s understanding of the nature of such praying; it is not only speaking mysteries to God, or praise and blessing God, or ‘inarticulate groanings in times of present weakness, but a way of engaging the enemy in the ongoing conflict.’<sup>86</sup>

### ***Praying in the Spirit and Praying in Tongues***

This is some pungent scholarly support for a pneumatologically real (charismatic and prophetic) understanding of what Paul envisioned when he exhorted the Ephesians to be careful to pray *in the Spirit*. What’s more, as Fee makes the connection between Ephesians 6:18, Romans 8:26-27, and 1 Corinthians 14:14-15, he refers to the phenomenon of *glossolalic* prayer—praying in tongues. And Fee is not alone in allowing for a connection between these three Pauline passages. Commenting on the nature of the praying in the Spirit Paul referred to in Romans 8:26, eminent evangelical scholars F. F. Bruce and C. K. Barrett both acknowledge the possibility that Paul may have had *glossolalia* in mind.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, contra the conclusion that

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<sup>86</sup> Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 731. While it’s true that in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 Paul speaks of praying and singing with *his* spirit, elsewhere in the chapter he refers to the same dynamic as occurring “by the Spirit” (14:2), and “in the Spirit” (14:16).

<sup>87</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 165; C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 168.

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Muddiman drew from his analysis of Romans 8:15, Barrett suggests that, while Paul may have had a worship setting in mind when referring to the Spirit-enabled cry “*Abba, Father,*” the apostle may have also been referring to “Spirit-inspired prayers (cf. 1 Cor. xiv. 15).” According to Barrett, “The use of the violent word, ‘cry out’ might suggest a free prayer spontaneously inspired by the Spirit.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, Barrett is honest about the possibility that it’s possible to construe the “*Abba, Father*” utterance as ecstatic or “prophetic” in nature. Thus, there is even more scholarly support for my contention that Paul may have had a special kind of praying in mind when, in his “armor of God” discussion, he encouraged his Ephesian readers to pray *in the Spirit*. There’s a huge difference between every other form of prayer and the Spirit praying *through us* in a prophetic manner that bypasses our human understanding. Since we know that, in private, Paul himself prayed in this charismatic, prophetic manner (1 Cor 14:2, 14-19), there’s good reason to believe that the apostle may have had this kind of praying in mind in Ephesians 6:18.

### ***Praying in the Spirit and Praying through Wordless Groans***

But, this raises the question of how we might suggest that Ephesians 6:18 implies a charismatic and prophetic type of praying when not of all those sitting in our churches are in possession of what’s commonly referred to as a “prayer language”? I deal with this scenario every semester as I lecture on pneumatology in the theology course I referred to in this paper’s introduction. On the one hand, I’m not at all reluctant to let my students know that, as a Pent-evangelical, my own praying in the Spirit can and often does take the form of *glossolalic* prayer. Moreover, because I’m aware that even those students who do possess a prayer language may not be using it, I also explain *why* praying in the Spirit each day in this very charismatic,

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<sup>88</sup> See Barrett, 164.

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prophetic manner is so important to my cultivation of an ongoing mentoring relationship with the risen and ascended Jesus that empowers me to remain faithful and fruitful in the spiritual, moral, and missional dimensions of my walk with him.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, I go on to indicate that I’m also open to the possibility that prophetic praying—the Spirit praying through us—can occur when Christian disciples engage in a viscerally intense waiting, travailing before God that *literally* involves “wordless groans.”<sup>90</sup> In both 1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-15 where praying in tongues is referred to, and in Romans 8:26, where Paul refers to prayer occurring through wordless groans, the apostle seems to be describing a kind of praying that does not originate in, and is not limited by, human understanding. Thus, a literal reading of both passages would suggest the possibility that a genuine partnering in prayer with the Spirit can occur whether it’s by means of *glossolalia* or wordless groans. In both prayer methods, the Spirit of Christ is praying through the disciple in a way that bypasses human understanding. In both forms of prayer, therefore, an extraordinary degree of trust and humility on the part of the person praying is required. Perhaps those dynamics which *glossolalic* prayer and praying through wordless groans have in common

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<sup>89</sup> I’ll offer here two observations pertinent to this paper: First, what it’s worth, my experience has been that a discernible (though not necessarily direct) correlation seems to exist between my praying in the Spirit (in the more charismatic/prophetic sense) and: (1) an increased creativity; and (2) the likelihood that something prophetic might occur during the preaching, teaching, counseling, or writing moment I’m preparing for. Second, if it be allowed that the devil-defeating “drawing near to God” that’s referred to in James 4:7-8 might involve expressions of praise and thanksgiving (cf. 1 Cor 14:1-17; Ps 100:4; 2 Chron 20:21) as well as repentance and mourning (see Ps 100:4), this might explain why my personal experience has been that praying in Spirit has proved to be a way of experiencing an empowering sense of Christ’s presence in the face of intense temptation to follow the flesh rather than the Spirit (Gal 5:16-17) or to give in to feelings of discouragement or despair. For more on the role of the Spirit in the cultivation of the threefold faithfulness, see Tyra, *Getting Real*, 61-118. For a more on the benefits of *glossolalic* prayer, see Robert W. Graves, *Praying in the Spirit* (Tulsa: Empowered Life, 2016), 30-32. Moreover, in a paper yet to be written, I plan to treat the Christian living and ministry implications of some neuroscience research which focuses on the effect of praying in the Spirit on brain functioning. My thesis is that God has hard-wired human beings to be able to experience multiple benefits (physical, psychological, and spiritual) from praying in the Spirit. Thus, the goal of the paper will be to provide a compelling, demystified but not despiritualized understanding of the phenomenon.

<sup>90</sup> For example, see Wallis, 95-96.

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shouldn't be underestimated. Perhaps there's reason to believe that both are pathways to a prophetic, empowering interaction with God!

In the quote presented above, we see that Fee, himself, was careful not to assert that praying in the Spirit must necessarily involve praying in tongues.<sup>91</sup> While it requires a certain degree of theological and exegetical humility on the part of both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals, this both/and understanding of praying in the Spirit makes it possible for both evangelical and Pent-evangelical pastors to encourage their church members to take seriously Paul's call to pray in the Spirit, whether they *currently* possess a “prayer language” or not. But, it must be quickly asserted that what is not permissible is for Christians to be “hearers” of Ephesians 6:18 but not “doers” also (Jas 1:22). I'm in the habit of telling church members, students, and fellow academics: *How ever we understand what it means to pray in the Spirit, if we want to put on the armor of God, we must actually do it!*

### ***Praying in the Spirit and an Empowering Lifestyle-Spirituality***

It's this exhortation to engage in a special kind of prayer that makes this epistle-ending discussion so much more than a mere recapitulation. What's more, I contend that a presentation of Paul's “armor of God” discussion which correctly emphasizes its call to engage in pneumatologically real prayer can't help but be existentially impactful. While it doesn't involve a daily recitation of a scripted prayer, it does require that we take some prayerful action. Specifically, I'm suggesting that in Ephesians 6:18 Paul exhorts his readers to make praying in the Spirit a central, ongoing activity in their everyday lives. To pray in the Spirit doesn't require a dedicated time and space, nor a type of concentration that would prohibit it occurring in

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<sup>91</sup> Agreeing with Fee, Arthur Wallis adds an important clarification when he states that: “praying in the Spirit is not necessarily praying in tongues, but praying in tongues should always be praying in the Spirit.” See Wallis, 91.

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between, and even while engaging in, various activities during the day. It’s an interaction with God that can occur “on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph 6:18; cf. Phil 4:6; 1 Thess 5:16-18).” In other words, praying in the Spirit can become part of *lifestyle-spirituality* that enables Christian disciples to experience the divine empowerment that Paul’s teaching, here and elsewhere, infers is not only possible but necessary. Put differently, I contend that an important key to successfully heeding all the Pauline exhortations presented in Ephesians 6:10-18 is the cultivation of a life-style spirituality that enables us to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25) so that we might, on an ongoing basis, “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Eph 6:10; cf. 3:16). *Indeed, a lifestyle of prayerfully partnering with the Spirit may very well be the key to obeying all the moral and ministry imperatives included in the second half of all of Paul’s letters!* So, once again, whether our praying in the Spirit takes the form of praying in tongues, or allowing the Spirit to pray through us via wordless groans, we simply must be doing it!

### **Paul’s Personal Request for Prayer (6:19-20)**

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>{20}</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Eph 6:19-20)

There is one last section of the “classic spiritual warfare passage” to be examined before I draw this paper to a close. Some commentators consider Paul’s request that the Ephesian disciples pray (in the Spirit) for him and his preaching ministry to be part of the apostle’s “armor of God” discussion.<sup>92</sup> I not only concur with this perspective, but contend that the best way to make sense of Paul’s prayer request is to view it as an invitation for his readers to engage in some *prophetic*

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<sup>92</sup> For example, see O’Brien, 483-84.

*intercession* on his behalf. To wit: that he might experience a *prophetic anointing* upon his own proclamation of the gospel!

The fact that not once but twice in these two verses Paul indicated his desire to proclaim the mystery of the gospel "fearlessly" makes it apparent he was requesting prayer for the *Spirit-imparted boldness* Jesus had promised the apostolic community (Acts 1:8).<sup>93</sup> But Paul's request also indicated this concern: "that whenever I speak, words may be given me. . . ." Even some non-Pentecostal-charismatic scholars are willing to suggest that Paul was soliciting prayer over the *content* of his preaching as well as its *delivery*.<sup>94</sup> But what does this mean since, in an earlier section of the Ephesian letter, Paul had already indicated a profound degree of familiarity with the "mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 3:1-13)?

The answer to this question may lie in the fact that, in addition to promising his apostles that the Holy Spirit would provide them with a holy boldness (Acts 1:8), Jesus had also provided them the following word of warning and promise:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. <sup>{17}</sup> Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. <sup>{18}</sup> On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. <sup>{19}</sup> But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, <sup>{20}</sup> for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Mt. 10:16-20, emphasis added)

*Could it be that Paul, who describes himself in Ephesians 6:20 as an "ambassador in chains," had this Jesus-saying in mind when he asked the Ephesians to pray (in the Spirit) for him? What I'm suggesting is that the type of prophetic intercession Paul solicited in Ephesians 6:19 was for an anointing to rest upon him that would result in preaching that was prophetic in nature and*

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<sup>93</sup> See Foulkes, 179-80.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, see Brown, 102.

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therefore transformational in effect (cf. 1 Cor. 14:24-25).<sup>95</sup> Some implicit support for this possibility is provided by the highly regarded German New Testament scholar, Rudolph Schnackenburg, who acknowledges that the phrase “that whenever I speak, words may be given me. . . .” connotes “prophetic speech” and echoes Old Testament passages such as Ezekiel 3:27, 29:21; 33:22; and Daniel 10:16.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, it’s my contention that *a truly Spirit-sensitive (pneumatologically real) interpretation of Paul’s armor of God discussion will maintain that it was a prophetic anointing upon his preaching that Paul asked the Ephesian disciples to pray for on his behalf. Moreover, I also contend that such an interpretation will be impactful in the sense that it encourages church members to earnestly pray that their preaching minister, and preachers everywhere, might experience the same type of prophetic anointing!*

## **Conclusion**

The stated goal of this paper was to put forward an interpretation and approach to putting on the whole armor of God that, while being less mystical and more practical, is still Pentecostal. It was also my ambition to provide an understanding of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion that, because it’s both exegetically responsible and existentially impactful, will encourage church members to respond to this important passage of Scripture with the seriousness its subject matter merits. Finally, I also indicated in the paper’s introduction the hope that this essay, though academic in nature, might nevertheless serve as a helpful resource, enabling church leaders to become even more effective at providing church members with some badly needed *endurance training*.

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<sup>95</sup> For more on the *transformational* nature of prophetic preaching, see “From *Sola Scriptura* to the Sacramental Sermon: Karl Barth, Pneumatological Realism and Prophetic Preaching” in Tyra, *Getting Real*, 168-70.

<sup>96</sup> See Schnackenburg, 283.

The paper was driven by my desire as a university professor with three decades of pastoral experience to see the youth of our churches develop a keen awareness of the very real need to put on the spiritual armor that Christ himself used to overcome the evil one in his own life and ministry. By now it should be obvious that I believe the most effective way to do this is to expose church members to a Spirit-sensitive understanding of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion. My reasoning is thus: Jesus has sent his Spirit into our lives to empower us to cultivate the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness our Father in heaven desires and deserves—that is, to stand firm against the devices of the devil.<sup>97</sup> But, this empowerment is not automatic. The apostle Paul made clear how very necessary it is for Christian disciples to “keep in step” with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), and to continually “be filled” with him (Eph. 5:18-20).<sup>98</sup> This, I suggest, explains why Paul’s “armor of God” discussion culminates with a call to develop

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<sup>97</sup> If only in a footnote, I want to acknowledge the fact that, though my interpretation of Paul’s “armor of God” discussion suggests that putting on the armor of God will result in disciples not only resisting the devil but doing damage to him as well, the practice of exorcism—casting out demons—was not explicitly addressed. While it’s true that most scholars don’t believe that Paul had this dynamic in mind when he composed this epistle-ending discussion, I will offer the following five observations. First, per the book of Acts and references to exorcism by the early church fathers, it appears that “exorcism was a standard part of early church life.” (See Boyd, *God at War*, 280.) Second, not only does the book of Acts portray Paul as engaging in a ministry of exorcism (Acts 16:16-18; 19:11-12), it also suggests that Paul’s exorcism ministry might have been on par with that of Jesus himself (Acts 19:13-16)! Third, a possible connection between Paul’s “armor of God” discussion and what is often referred to as “deliverance ministry,” is the importance of the Spirit to Ephesians 6:10-20 and the deliverance ministries of Jesus and Paul (see Mt 12:28; 1 Cor 2:4); Fourth, another possible connection might be inferred from the fact that the deliverance ministries of both Jesus and Paul seemed to derive from the same type of lifestyle-spirituality connoted in Ephesians 6:18-20—a spirituality earmarked by a serious devotion to prayer (e.g., Mk 9:25-29 [cf. Lk 5:16]; Acts 16:16-18 [cf. Col 1:9; 1 Thess 3:10; 5:17; 2 Tim 1:3]). Finally, for what it’s worth, some practitioners have commented on the value of praying in the Spirit with respect to deliverance ministry. (For example, see Wallis, 92-94. See also Don Basham, *Deliver Us from Evil: A Pastor’s Reluctant Encounters with the Powers of Darkness* [Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 1972], 203-4.) These five observations lead me to wonder if Paul didn’t simply presume that his Ephesian readers, with their personal experience of his ministry of deliverance (Acts 19:1-20), would understand that the “armor of God” spirituality he was encouraging them to cultivate would not only enable them to “resist” the devil, but do so with extreme prejudice!

<sup>98</sup> Commenting on the exhortation found in Ephesians 5:18 to be filled with the Spirit, Frances Foulkes writes: “the tense of the verb, present imperative in the Greek, should be noted, implying as it does that the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit . . . is not a ‘once for all’ experience. In the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles it is repeated a number of times that the apostles were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’ The practical implication is that the Christian is to leave his life open to be filled constantly and repeatedly by the divine Spirit.” See Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 152.



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a biblically-informed, Christ-honoring spirituality, at the heart of which is the phenomenon of partnering with the Spirit in prayer (i.e., praying *in the Spirit*).<sup>99</sup> Moreover, Paul goes on to clarify that this prayer partnering with the Spirit should become a lifestyle, occurring on a daily, ongoing basis, as the Spirit himself directs (Eph 6:18). Though this may seem at first to be an eccentric take on the text, *some have found in this prayer-based spirituality a remarkably helpful way to keep in step with Spirit and be continually being filled with him, experiencing in the process the spiritual, moral, and missional empowerment the Holy Spirit longs to provide* (cf. Jude 1:20-21).<sup>100</sup>

Just think of it: more young adults arriving at Christian and secular colleges and universities already suited up in the armor of God and thereby steeled against the post-Christian impulse that’s rife in our culture due to the insidious influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil! In his correspondence with the church in Corinth, Paul wrote:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. <sup>{3}</sup> But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor 11:2-3)

This poignant passage suggests to me that providing church members with some Spirit-sensitive endurance training is a big part of what pastoring is about! Or should be. Once again, I hope this paper helps.

*Coram deo!*

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<sup>99</sup> Some support for this contention is provided in Rankin, 265.

<sup>100</sup> For more on the connection between Ephesians 5:18 and Romans 8:26, see Rankin, 265. For more on how praying in the Spirit each day can contribute to the cultivation of an ongoing mentoring relationship with the risen Christ, see Tyra, *Christ’s Empowering Presence*, 179. For more on the importance of church leaders “prayerfully partnering with the Spirit” as part of the process of encouraging a corporate embrace of a pneumatological realism in the churches they serve, see Tyra, *Getting Real*, 122-23, 123n2.

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