

THE WAR ON FULLNESS

Confronting the Powers that Inhibit the Fullness of Christ in the World

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SPIRITUAL WARFARE: WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING?

A friend of mine was recently gathering with other Christian leaders. In the context of the discussion he suggested that the institutional church construct was demonised. This evoked a very strong and defensive reaction. These leaders were all very Kingdom minded with a passion for Christian unity. Each one would be critical any church structures that inhibited unity and Kingdom ministry. In spite of this, it was inconceivable for them that the construct of the institutional western church could be under satanic influence. We are very familiar with Paul's words to the Church in Ephesus that 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.¹ Why do we not consider that such rulers and authorities could exist within church structures?

As I asked myself this question, I realised that I had never heard the armour of God passage taught in its context of the letter to the Ephesians. These ten verses in chapter six are usually taught either in isolation, or the context of other biblical references to spiritual warfare. The latter is of course a valid hermeneutical principle. However, we run the risk of missing some critical revelation if we do not consider these verses in the context of the five and a half chapters of discourse that precedes them.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a powerful treatise on the fullness of Christ. He declares that the Church is the body of Christ, the *fullness* of him who fills everything in every way (1:23). Paul prays that through grasping the boundless love of Christ, they would be filled to the measure of all the *fullness* of God (3:19). The apostle teaches that through releasing the Christ-appointed leadership ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher, the Church would be built up, attaining to the whole measure of the *fullness* of Christ (4:11-13). The letter is essentially a detailed commentary on growing in this fullness. At the end of the letter Paul sounds a warning – the need for believers to put on the armour of God. Why? Because there are rulers and authorities influenced by evil spiritual forces that would try to attack them and inhibit their capacity to be filled with the fullness of God and to fill the earth with this same fullness.

There is a war on the fullness of Christ in the world. There are forces that oppose the fullness of Jesus and forces that inhibit the fullness of Jesus. I contend that the institutional church construct actually inhibits the capacity of the Church to be the fullness of Christ.

¹ Ephesians 6:12

Defining “Institutional Church Construct”

Before proceeding any further, it is important to define *institutional church construct*. I am certainly not referring to any specific denomination within the Church. Nor am I referring to mainline churches over charismatic/Pentecostal churches. Any expression of church can come under the influence of this construct.

Institutional church construct refers to the overarching mindset and structure that predisposes congregations, denominations, house churches, ministry networks, and mission organisations to give priority to building, maintaining and defending their distinctive expression of “church” over and against the local, regional, national and global expression of the Body of Christ.

In order to validate the thesis that the institutional church construct inhibits the fullness of Jesus in the world, we will navigate our way through the letter to the Ephesians section by section.² We will firstly look at how Paul has defined fullness, and then Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians in pursuing fullness. Finally, his warning concerning the spiritual opposition will be considered: the war on fullness.

THE CHURCH AS FULLNESS

After making his opening greeting, Paul begins by encouraging the Christians at Ephesus to remember who they have become in Christ, and the blessings that are theirs in Him. In love, they were chosen and adopted into the family of the God of heaven and earth. When they *responded* to the Father’s choice **and** *accepted* the message, they were given the Spirit as a deposit of what they would inherit in the future redemption. Paul prays that the Spirit may enlighten them with wisdom and revelation, through which they would know the hope to which they are called, the rich inheritance they have received, and the incomparably great power that is within them. Because they have received the Spirit, the same power that raised Christ from the dead is within them. What a mind blowing truth! (1:1-19). Paul reinforces this truth later in his letter when he prays that the Holy Spirit may strengthen them with power in their inner being (3:16). He declares that through the power of the Holy Spirit at work within them, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine (3:20).

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *Today’s New International Version (TNIV)*, International Bible Society, 2001, 2005.

The Supreme Authority of Christ [1:19b-22a]

All this is a lead-up to the first part of the defining statement in his letter:

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet....

The ascended Christ is the supreme authority: every ruler, authority, power and dominion³ must submit to Him⁴. He disarmed them and triumphed over them on the cross.⁵ The word “rule” is translated from the Greek word *arche*, mean ‘beginning, or ‘first place’. The noun *archon* refers to a ruler or prince who has first place. The Greek word for authority is *exousia*, meaning bearer of authority, or ruling power. “Power” is translated from *dynameeos* (from which comes our English word “dynamite”), and “dominion” (Greek *kurioteetos*), as the word suggests, refers to lordship or dominion over any realm. There are numerous references to “rulers and authorities” in the New Testament as either civil or religious authorities, or angelic or demonic powers⁶. There is nothing to suggest here that Paul was making any distinction. His clear point that any ruling authority – human, angelic or demonic - exercising power or dominion over any sphere, is under the rule of the risen, ascended Christ. It was critical for the Christians in Ephesus to realise this. Their city was a very powerful city at this time – it was a centre of political and economic power for the whole of Asia Minor. It was also a centre of religious/spiritual power: the temple of the goddess Artemis was there, and sorcery/witchcraft was practiced.⁷ However, **Christ has supreme authority over every force in the cosmos.**

Church: The Fullness of Christ in the World [1:22b-23]

The second part of this defining statement reads:

...and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (1:22b-23)

It is one thing for the Christians in Ephesus to understand who they are in Christ and what He has done for them. However, it is critical that they understand their relationship with Christ is not something they live out in isolation. Rather as followers of Christ, they are part of a universal community of believers known as the Church. Paul likens the relationship between the ascended Christ and His earthly followers as that of a head and a body. A body cannot survive unless it is connected to a head. It will quickly die. Similarly, a head without a body is useless. For the ascended Christ to continue his ministry on earth, He needs a body.

³ The *King James* and *New King James* versions translate these words “principality, power, might and dominion”. Most other modern versions translate the same as the *TNIV* above.

⁴ Ephesians 1:21, Colossians 2:10

⁵ Colossians 2:15

⁶ H. Bietenhard, “*arche*”, in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 1. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1986, 164-168.

⁷ Acts 19:19, 23-41

When Jesus walked the earth He shared the Good News with people: “the Kingdom of God is at Hand”⁸. He called people back to the Word of God, and taught them life-giving truth. He demonstrated the Kingdom through His indiscriminate love for all people who were lost to God. Jesus accepted and welcomed people that others rejected, such as children, women, people of other races and cultures, those who were “sinners” and who were “unclean.” As signs of the Kingdom He ministered healing and deliverance and performed all kinds of miracles. He genuinely cared for people, showing compassion in word and deed.

Jesus’ death didn’t spell the end of this ministry. Rather it heralded the expansion of His ministry. The risen Christ, before ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, commissioned His disciples to continue to do what He had been doing. They would preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations,⁹ and signs would follow their preaching.¹⁰ These disciples would continue to do all that he had taught and trained them to do, and they would in turn equip others to do it: they would make disciples of all nations.¹¹

Jesus’ ministry would continue long after he left the planet. However, as His physical body was no longer on earth, He needed a body to continue His ministry – He needed a heart to love, a voice to proclaim and teach; hands and feet to care for and guide lost people back to the Father. Jesus’ followers would collectively be this body¹², and they would be called the Church. The body would be connected to the ascended Christ, the supreme authority, the head, through the indwelling Holy Spirit,¹³ who would guide¹⁴ and empower¹⁵ them to continue Jesus’ ministry of proclaiming and demonstrating the Kingdom of God on earth.

How is this ministry expressed? **By filling every sphere of creation with the fullness of Jesus Christ** – *the fullness of him who fills everything in every way*¹⁶.

This is a defining statement in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The Church that Jesus came to create, inaugurated at Pentecost, is a Spirit-filled body of believers who will be God’s instrument to bring His Kingdom to the world by filling every sphere of creation with the fullness of Jesus Christ.

PURSUING FULLNESS

⁸ Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15.

⁹ Luke 24:47; John 20:21-23

¹⁰ Mark 16:15-18

¹¹ Matthew 28:18-20

¹² 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

¹³ Ephesians 1:13, 3:16

¹⁴ John 16:13

¹⁵ Acts 1:8

¹⁶ Ephesians 1:23, Colossians 1:19-20

Pursuing Fullness through a New Temple [2:1-3:13]

In order to begin to represent the fullness of Jesus in the world the Ephesians, as Gentiles, needed assurance that they were now part of the one household of God, along with the Jews. Membership of God's household no longer depended on heritage or human rules or regulations.¹⁷ We become followers of Christ, and therefore members of His Church through a personal faith response to the grace of God extended through Jesus – not by any of our own works.¹⁸ Under the Old Covenant, the temple was the visible expression of the presence of God. However, if the Church is to be the fullness of Jesus in the world, it cannot be restricted to a building of bricks and mortar. Under the New Covenant the followers of Jesus *are* the Temple, the dwelling place of God. This Temple is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus himself as the cornerstone. And we are the living stones which comprise the temple; we are the holy priesthood that the Lord has raised up, to represent Him to the world, and represent the world to Him, as we fill the world with His fullness.¹⁹ How the Lord longs for the day when the whole earth will be His temple, when the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord,²⁰ when the dwelling of God is with His people.²¹

In order for this to happen, we, the Church, must see ourselves as a holy temple of living stones. If the Church was a physical temple, as in the Old Testament, it could not fill the world with the fullness of Jesus. Activity is restricted to events connected with the building at any one time. But the risen Jesus did not commission His people to come into a building, but to go into all the world. As a fluid temple of living stones, in which His Spirit dwells, His followers live and relate and interact with lost people in a variety of spheres. When believers, who are part of His temple, gather in these spheres, Jesus is there in the midst of them²², guiding and empowering them by His Spirit to fill those spheres with his fullness. Surely this is at least in part what Jesus meant when he told his followers that they would do greater works than Him after he had returned to the Father.²³ As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus could only be in one place at one time. But when He ascended to the Father, as the Head He imparted life to the body through the Spirit. This body – this temple - could take Jesus' natural and supernatural presence anywhere in the world they would chose to go – *filling the world with His fullness*.

Pursuing Fullness through Christ's Boundless Love [3:14-21]

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:12-15

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-10

²⁰ Revelation 11:15

²¹ Revelation 21:3

²² Matthew 18:20

²³ John 14:12

So, what expression does this ‘fullness’ take? Paul begins to address this in the next paragraph of his letter. After praying that they would be strengthened with power through the Spirit, through whom Christ dwells in their hearts through their faith, he prays that they,

being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (3:18-19).

When Jesus walked the earth He embodied love – indiscriminate, unconditional love for people who were lost from God. It was a love which manifested as *grace* to people undeserving of God’s love.²⁴ It was a love which manifested as *truth* to those who were deceived or were ignorant of God’s life-giving Word.²⁵ It was a love which manifested as *justice* to people who were poor, oppressed and excluded.²⁶ This holy, indiscriminate, unconditional love for people that Jesus demonstrated is a critical sign of the Kingdom of God and a critical factor in people being reconciled to the God who abounds in steadfast love.²⁷

If the Church is to fill everything with the fullness of Christ, then the Church must embody love as Jesus did. We can only love because He first loved us.²⁸ In order to love others as Jesus loved, we must be rooted and established in love, and be able to grasp the sheer magnitude of this love. In praying this for the Ephesians, and for the Church, Paul was echoing Jesus’ own words to his followers: *as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love.*²⁹ Paul was affirming the words of Jude: *keep yourselves in God’s love...*³⁰ Why? So that we may be *filled to the measure of the fullness of God.*

Pursuing Fullness through Oneness [4:1-6]

Having prayed that members of Jesus’ Church would be rooted and established in love, Paul then urges members to express that love to each other:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (4:2-3)

In doing this, Paul is merely reiterating the command that Jesus gave:

²⁴ e.g. Matthew 9:9-12; Luke 19:1-10; John 8:1-11

²⁵ e.g. Matthew 5-7; Mark 10:17-31; John 4:1-26

²⁶ e.g. Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 10:25-37

²⁷ Exodus 34:6

²⁸ 1 John 4:19

²⁹ John 15:9

³⁰ Jude 21

*A new command I give you: **Love one another.** As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.***³¹

Some of us have vivid memories of our church youth group years, when we sang the chorus *A New Commandment*³² while joining hands and swaying around a campfire. I doubt that many of us at that time really grasped the seriousness of these words, nor did we hear them in the context of the gut-wrenching prayer of Jesus to the Father:

*...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us **so that the world may believe that you have sent me**.....that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. **Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.***³³

Can we hear the critical connection here? If the Church is to be the fullness of Jesus in the world, then the believers who *are* the Church need to love as Jesus loved, and be in relationship with other believers in a manner that demonstrates the same oneness that existed between the Father and the Son. Because when the world sees this, the world will know that Jesus is the real deal. This is why Paul urged the Church – the body – to make every effort to be in unity one with another. *Oneness* is critical if *fullness* is to happen.

The Hub of Fullness: Jesus' Leadership Strategy [4:7-16]

Fullness will not happen just by remaining grounded in God's love and in unity with each other. In order for this indiscriminate unconditional love and oneness to overflow from the Church and into the world, a strategy and functional leadership structure is needed. In His life and ministry on earth, Jesus demonstrated this strategy and structure.

Jesus was an **Apostle**³⁴ sent by the Father to establish His Kingdom on earth. Wearing this apostolic mantle Jesus not only preached and demonstrated the Kingdom with signs and wonders, but also very strategically identified, fathered, mentored, trained and released followers to preach and demonstrate the Kingdom, and in turn raise up other followers in the same manner as he did. Jesus was also a **Prophet**: He heard from the Father and declared the Word to the people. Jesus was an **Evangelist**: He proclaimed the Good News of the Gospel to people, calling people to follow Him, leading them to the Father. Jesus was a **Pastor**: as a Shepherd guides sheep to food and water and protects them from danger, so did Jesus with His followers. Jesus was a **Teacher**: He explained the Scriptures and help people apply them to their lives. Jesus not only did these things, but He also **equipped** his followers to do them, sending first the twelve disciples, and then later seventy followers into villages to do what He had trained them to do.³⁵

³¹ John 13:34-35

³² *Scripture in Song*, Book One, Songs of Praise, 1979, no.12

³³ John 17:21-23

³⁴ Greek *apostolos* – one sent as an envoy/ambassador, having the full powers of the one who is sending.

³⁵ Luke 9:1-6; Luke 10:1-23

When Jesus gave the Great Commission and then ascended into Heaven, He didn't "delegate and desert" and some leaders do. Paul articulates Jesus' leadership strategy for His Church: when He ascended to Heaven, Christ imparted these five leadership ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher to certain members of the body. They would in turn equip all members of the body within their orbit for ministry:

*So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers, **to equip his people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, **attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ** (4:11-13).*

As Paul so powerfully shares in his first letter to the Corinthian Church, the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to the body and each part of the body has a part to play in the building up of the body of Christ.³⁶ However, the exercise of these five leadership ministries ensure that members of the body are equipped to exercise their spiritual gifts in such a manner that **apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral and teaching ministry overflows from the Church into the world, filling it with the fullness of Christ**. The aim of this strategy is clear: as the church, we are to do this until we reach unity of faith, knowledge, and maturity measured by our attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

This is the strategy that enables the Church to complete the commission that Jesus gave the Church: to preach the Gospel to the whole world, making disciples of all nations.

The Outworking of Fullness [4:17-6:9]

At first instance, it could seem as though the next section of the letter is a diversion from Paul's commentary of fullness, to indulge in some moralistic discourse. Not at all! Paul is giving specific instructions and guidance for the outworking of this fullness in the lives and relationships of believers, and within the spheres in which they live and move. In order to love people indiscriminately and unconditionally as Jesus did, and in order to live in unity with other believers, Christians must learn to draw on the power of the Spirit in their inner being³⁷ to transform them. Members need the enabling of the Spirit to live in truth, refrain from dishonesty and unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage, anger, lack of forgiveness, sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, etc.³⁸ These sinful behaviours will sever their capacity to grow in intimacy with the Lord. Lack of intimacy inhibits our capacity to be rooted and grounded in love, thereby quenching our ability to flow that love to others. Worship is a vital part of sustaining and growing in intimacy with the Lord, hence the encouragement to sing and make music in their hearts to the Lord, and always giving thanks to

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 12

³⁷ Ephesians 3:16

³⁸ Ephesians 4:17-5:20.

Him.³⁹ Paul gives some instructions on how fullness can flow in the marriage and family sphere,⁴⁰ and in the work sphere.⁴¹

THE WAR ON FULLNESS

The very next section of Paul's letter begins with these words:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power (6:10)

Paul is effectively saying, **“there is one more thing I need to say about all of this:** you need to be strong in the Lord and in His power; you need to put on the amour of God.....” In other words, **the ten verses that follow this statement are undeniably linked to everything that Paul has previously stated.**

This therefore, is the context in which we must understand the spiritual warfare discourse: The risen Christ is seated at the right hand of God, far above all rule and authority, and the Church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. We are all part of this body – Jew and Gentile – because Christ, in his death, reconciled us all to Him. In order to *be* the fullness of Christ in the world, we need to be rooted and established in His love; we need to be in unity with each other. The Church needs to be growing strategically according to the pattern set down of Jesus: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers equipping all believers for ministry until we reach the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. We need to intentionally work with the Holy Spirit within us so that our attitudes and actions are transformed, enabling the fullness of Christ to flow into our relationships in marriage, family, work, community, etc. Many will say “but we have been trying to do this. So why are we not seeing more fruit from our efforts?”

Paul goes on to warn the Church that in order to do this, the Church will need to be strong in the Lord; that believers will need to put on their armour. Why? **Because there is spiritual opposition of an extremely intense nature against the world being filled with the fullness of Jesus Christ.** So, the Church, as the body of Christ, empowered by the Spirit to be the fullness of Christ in the world, is being warned that it will face opposition! There is a war on fullness! Satan does not want to see the world filled with the fullness of Jesus!

Again I ask: why do we not hear Ephesians 6:10-20 taught in this context?

The Nature of the Battle [6:11-12]

³⁹ Ephesians 5:19-20; Colossians 3:6.

⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:21-6:4

⁴¹ Ephesians 6:5-9. Although slavery is (thankfully) abolished in most places, these instructions can be equally applied to employer/employee relationships.

Let's consider the nature of this battle, and who and what it is that we are fighting:

Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 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. (6:11-12)

By expanding words *rulers* and *authorities* with the terms *powers of this dark world* and *spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*, Paul is clearly referring to demonic influence working within and through the rulers and authorities. He experienced this first hand in the city of Ephesus, as he not only took on sorcery, but the very powerful ruling authority of the goddess Artemis.⁴²

If earthly rulers and authorities are not submitted to Christ, then they are open to satanic influence. They become prime targets for Satan's highly organised spiritual army – the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms - to invade them. They are thus no longer neutral, but become rulers and authorities under the control of the kingdom of darkness and as such oppose and fight against the Kingdom of God. In other words, they fight against the role and purpose of the Church to be the fullness of Christ in the world.

The Demonisation of Rulers and Authorities

Let's look at some obvious examples of rulers and authorities that are not submitted to God and thus have become demonised. Back in Jesus' day, the Jewish authorities and the Roman Government were two obvious examples of this. The Romans were under pagan influence, and the Jews had allowed their wooden legalism to emasculate the Torah, thus removing them from the protection of Yahweh and placing them under satan's influence. As such they were deceived and unable to recognise the Messiah, handing him over to the authorities for torture and execution.

Some other examples of demonised rulers and authorities in our day are Islam, Hinduism, Nazism, Communism, and the like. If proper accountability does not exist, or if the organisation moves away from its original intent, government authorities, small companies, national and multi-national corporations or parts thereof can leave themselves open to satanic influence. At worst they can become corrupt, or at best they allow bureaucracy to diminish or suppress their original intent, resulting in injustice or oppression. They then become barriers to the fullness of Christ in the world.

Veteran charismatic renewal leader Bob Mumford has written a very insightful booklet titled *Dr Frankenstein and World Systems*.⁴³ This intriguing title arises from a powerful analogy. We are probably familiar with Mary Shelley's novel about Dr Frankenstein, who created a human being from various stolen body parts. He brings the created being to life by shooting electricity into it. The creature awakens, slides off the table and begins to walk and talk. The creature is initially gentle and

⁴² Acts 19

⁴³ Morning Star Publications, Wilkesboro NC, 2003

innocent, but it then takes on a life of its own, and becomes a destructive terror. What Frankenstein created he could not control.⁴⁴

Mumford states that whenever an organisation departs from its created intent, it becomes a ruling force or *authority*:

*This force takes on, assumes, or is given power and authority that was not originally intended. The persona, i.e., the corporation or corpus, begins to exhibit coercion and tyranny. With some discernment, it can now be seen as a spiritual force, injuring and using people. Our attempts to avoid responsibility and employ self-justification when we see the system injure and control and enhanced by excusing negative behaviour with such statements as, "well, you can't fight city hall" or "This is just the way it is done here." The system not only condones wrong actions, in some cases it encourages them for the strengthening of the authority & influence of the entity. This happens not only in secular organisations but also in churches and ministries around the world.*⁴⁵

Can Demonised Rulers and Authorities Exist within the Church?

Many people struggle to believe that churches and ministries can be demonised. Satan would prefer us to believe that this was impossible. It's not. Let's consider the example of Bob Mumford's own ministry – the parallels will then become obvious. He says:

*Lifechangers, as an organisation, was created in 1972. My intentions were godly and the declared purpose was to see significant teaching material translated and distributed to a minimum of twenty-five nations. Eventually it took on a life of its own. I found myself labouring long and hard to keep it alive. Expenses were paid out of my own pocket so it would continue to operate. Because I was serving it, I had to get others to serve it as well. One day I realised that it had taken on a life of its own. It (like Frankenstein's creature) had slid off of the table and stood up, looked me square in the face and said, "I am Lifechangers, you must do what I want." When I looked at what it had become in the light of a ruling force I thought, "Lifechangers is either going to come under His kingdom and live for God or die." I stopped sending out appeals for money and minimised travel. Then, it seemed, the very life of the Lord started to breathe upon me and the organisation. We are now free from having to serve it. The system died and Lifechangers lives to serve God's purposes!*⁴⁶

Can we see the parallels of movements and ministries that have been birthed in the purposes of God, but have moved from their original intent – moving from Kingdom values and principles to systems driven values and 'wants'? "I am Methodism, you must do what I want." "I am Lutheranism, you must do what I want." "I am Calvinism, you must do what I want." "I am

⁴⁴ Bob Mumford, *Dr Frankenstein & World Systems*. Wilkesboro, North Carolina: Morning Star, 2003, 5-6

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 27-28

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 38-39

Catholicism, you must do what I want.” “I am the Baptist Church/Salvation Army/Anglican Church/Uniting Church/AOG/COC etc etc...you must do what I want!”

“But so Much Good Stuff is Happening!”

A typical response from Christians – including passionate believers with a Kingdom heart and mind – is “how can these churches be under demonic influence when so much good stuff is happening in so many of them? People are getting saved and healed, and many of them are doing great things in their communities.”

Yes, there is amazing things happening in and through many institutional churches of all size and shapes throughout the world. Wherever people’s hearts are open to God and the ministry of His Spirit, they will see His presence manifest and signs of His Kingdom, regardless of the label on the church door. However, the “great stuff that is happening” must be evaluated in perspective. In 2000 years of Christendom, what percentage of the world’s population have become followers of Christ? What percentage of people in our cities and nations are Christians? Do our cities and nations reflect more of the values and ethos of the Kingdom of God? Are there a greater number of stronger marriages and families? Is their less crime? Is their less poverty and injustice in the world? If we are honest, we have to answer ‘no’ to all of these questions. In spite of the tireless efforts of millions and millions of Christians who, in the last 2000 years, who have faithfully served Jesus until their dying day, we have not seen lasting, growing transformation. In spite of the many revivals and reformation movements which had significant impact, in the big picture of things they have not resulted in a Church which looks more like Jesus and a world that looks more like God’s Kingdom.

Why not? Because in my view, the institutional church construct, as a ruling authority, inhibits this from happening. What begins as a move of the Holy Spirit invariably becomes an institution which slides off the table, takes on a life of its own and says “you must serve me.” Consequently a huge amount of effort by dedicated Christians is expended on maintaining the institution rather than filling the world with the fullness of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Why does this happen? Because when these outpourings of the Spirit occurred, and ministries and movements developed to sustain and grow these outpourings, they were initially fully submitted to Christ. However, somewhere in their life, while still acknowledging Jesus, they moved out of full submission to Him, took on a life of their own, and became part of the institutional church *ruling authority*.

Let’s consider some examples:

- revival outpourings that become organised denominations with little or no evidence of the manifest presence of God that defined the revival.
- evangelistic, teaching and/or apostolic ministries that are birthed in a particular location, and because of their ‘success’ are franchised to other parts of the nation and world, competing with indigenous expressions of these ministries
- a group of intercessors called to support mission in prayer who grow into an organised network which criticises missionary organisations for not praying enough. The latter then retaliate, accusing intercessors of not doing any active mission.

- a house church that multiplies, and then develops a centralised organisation to define the expression of these house churches, thus creating a pseudo denomination.

As a ruling authority, the institutional church construct is not fully submitted to Christ, and as such inhibits the capacity of the Church to be the fullness of Christ in the world. On what basis do I make this assertion? Let's ask some questions based on Paul's guidance to the Church in pursuing fullness as articulated in Ephesians:

1. *Is the institutional church construct known as a temple of living stones with all members serving as priests in the world, or as an organisation with buildings and professional clergy (like the temple and priests in the Old Testament)?*
2. *Is the institutional church construct known for reflecting the boundless, indiscriminate, unconditional love of Christ, or for excluding and segmenting on the basis of moral, ethical, racial, doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences*
3. *Is the institutional church construct known for keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, or for deep seated divisions? Do we see one church in cities/regions or many?*
4. *Is the institutional church construct known for identifying and releasing apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip all God's people for ministry? Or is it known for identifying and training clergy (ministers, pastors, priests, rectors, curates, bishops, archbishops, moderators, superintendants, presidents, directors and CEOs, etc) to lead and protect the particular denomination/ministry/network they represent within the institutional church?*

Again I wish to emphasise that throughout the last 2000 years there have been numerous persons, groups and movements who have risen up in obedience and could give an honest 'yes' to all of these questions. They have loved as Jesus loved. They were champions of unity. They have been apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers who equipped believers for ministry. They had a passionate drive to make disciples of all nations, filling the world with the fullness of Christ. However, most of these persons, groups and movements were at best marginalised or at worst persecuted by the institutional church. Consequently these movements either fizzle out and die or succumb and eventually become another organisation within the institutional church construct. Why? **Because the institutional church construct is not fully submitted to Christ. It is serving two masters – the Christ it acknowledges, and the one that fits within the system that it is now serving. As such, it is a ruling authority that has come under demonic influence.**

It should not be at all surprising that satan would give priority to demonising authorities within the church. If he can inhibit the capacity of the church to fill the world with Jesus, he in turn dilutes her effectiveness to engage in warfare with him in the world. Whatever else we think of satan, he is not dumb!

How the Institutional Church Inhibits Fullness

It's relatively easy to understand how demonically influenced rulers and authorities are at work in the world, through world religions, satanism, and people and organisations with corrupt and evil intent. In fact, it is not overly difficult to believe that the Church, or parts thereof, were demonised during and immediately following the Dark Ages. Within these times the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, was responsible for persecution and in some cases horrific atrocities during its various inquisitions. We can accept demonic influence in these cases. However, as frustrated as we may be with the structure and organisation of the institutional church today, we struggle to acknowledge it as a demonically influenced ruling authority. The problem is that when we do not acknowledge it in this way, neither do we fight it in the manner that Paul and the New Testament writers instruct. Consequently, it remains as a key inhibitor to the Church as the fullness of Christ in the world.

In order to more fully appreciate how the institutional church inhibits fullness, it will be helpful to consider Paul's teaching on the Church as fullness in light of a powerful statement that Jesus made concerning His Church:

On this rock I will build my church I will build my church, and the gates of death⁴⁷ will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.⁴⁸

My friend Brian Medway has delivered some truly insightful teaching on this passage, in a group study/DVD series called Building Monday's Church.⁴⁹ Brian observes that if the gates of death or hell will not overcome or prevail against the Church, then clearly the Church is actively coming against the gates of hell. The *gates of hell* are entry points to satan's strongholds in the world – places where he has influence to keep people locked out of the Kingdom of God.⁵⁰ Jesus said that he would give his Church the keys of the kingdom, so that whatever we bind and loose on earth will be done in heaven. The Gospels are filled with examples of where Jesus did this: He bound law and loosed grace; bound injustice and loosed justice, bound deception and loosed truth; bound sickness and loosed wholeness; bound oppression and loosed freedom, bound rejection and loosed acceptance, and many more. These keys are, in some way or another, a manifestation of the boundless, indiscriminate, unconditional love of Jesus. They are keys which release *spiritual authority*, as opposed to political, organisational or official authority.

Can you see the parallel with Paul's letter to the Ephesians? If the body of Christ is the fullness of Jesus, who fills everything in every way, then it will be a Church which storms the gates of hell in the world, thus confronting enemy strongholds which would stop the fullness of Jesus from being realised. As the Church, the fluid temple of living stones, we go into the various spheres in which we live and work, taking the keys – the spiritual authority – Jesus has given to us to unlock the truths,

⁴⁷ other versions translate this as *hades* or *hell*

⁴⁸ Matthew 16:18-19

⁴⁹ Brian Medway. *Building Monday's Church*, Session 3. DVD series available from Grace Canberra, GPO Box 513 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia, www.gracecanberra.com.au

⁵⁰ Brian Medway's *Building Monday's Church*, Session 3, unpublished notes, p.4ff. This is developed further.

values and lifestyle that reflect the Kingdom of God. By doing this we shut the door on the truths, values and lifestyle within these spheres that belong to the kingdom of darkness. Enemy strongholds in these spheres are destroyed allowing the fullness of Jesus to enter in fill them.

In order for this to happen, the Church will need to gather at these “gates of hell”, which are essentially entry points to enemy strongholds in the various spheres of the world. This is where the structure and organisation of the institutional church becomes an inhibiting ruling authority. The Scriptures clearly affirm the need for the Church to gather as believers, for worship and equipping through teaching and prophetic ministry.⁵¹ However, this same Church has been sent by Jesus into the world. When the church is present in the spheres of family, community, and workplace, etc., they are able to confront enemy strongholds within these spheres. If the Church is not present and active within these spheres, how can this happen?

The institutional church construct inhibits this in a number of ways:

1. Priority is not given to apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers equipping people for ministry. The leadership in ministry comes from clergy (known as ministers, pastors, priests, bishops, etc, depending on the denomination). Clergy may fulfil one or more of these roles, but in many cases they *do* the work, rather than equip all believers to do the work of ministry. Rarely would one find all five of these equipping ministries in one local church. This need not be an issue, because it is likely all five are present in some form within the Church in the city or region. However, the institutional church construct does not usually allow for the sharing of these leadership ministries for the equipping of the whole church in an area. Rather, it requires priority to be given to building the local church, according to the doctrinal and ecclesiastical distinctives of the particular denomination or network with which it is associated.
2. Although rhetoric and mission statements would say otherwise, priority is given to maintaining and growing the local church congregation or ministry/mission organisation according to the ethos, doctrine, polity and liturgical practice of the denomination or network. In terms of time, energy, money and skill, this takes priority over mission in the community. Mission statements by their nature become things that systems psychologically promote and thus serve, and become a standard and principle in itself. Thus the church, and particularly parachurch organisations that develop mission statements in line with government and secular teaching, end up inadvertently submitting to the mission statement rather than to Jesus.
3. Mission is often undertaken through programs and activities that are conducted in church buildings. Many of these can be quite effective per se, but because they happen in an environment away from the spheres where enemy strongholds exist, lost people do not always come. These programs and activities tend to keep dedicated believers very busy, leaving little time to be gathering at entry points to enemy strongholds in the world.

⁵¹ e.g. 1 Corinthians 14

Besides, this is contrary to Jesus' commission – He told us to *go into the world*, not invite people into the church!

4. While many institutional church congregations and ministries do offer ministry in the community which again is very effective per se, the effectiveness is limited because believers who do not belong to that particular congregation are usually excluded from the ministry. Invitations are often sent to believers in other congregations to join in, but in most instances this is not encouraged by the leadership, as it takes their priority away from work in maintaining these other congregations.
5. In many, in fact most instances there are often a number of believers present in streets, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, and workplaces. There is tremendous opportunity for these believers to gather as the Church and storm the gates of hell within these spheres. However, loyalty to their particular congregation within the institutional church often prohibits this. Leadership within these congregations often discourages such gatherings, demanding loyalty to the congregation and denomination/network to which it belongs.

In short, the structure and organisation of the institutional church inhibits, and I daresay destroys much Holy Spirit inspired synergy between believers who *are* the Church in streets, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and nations. Yes, Godly, Holy Spirit inspired and led ministries do result in revivals and Kingdom growth. However the separateness, and priority given to maintaining the institution, limits the capacity of these ministries to fill the world with the fullness of Jesus. What begins in the Spirit, often succumbs to the confines of the institution. What began as incarnational ministry succumbs to organisational construct. The spiritual keys of the Kingdom given by Jesus are replaced by official and organisational keys. The presence, power and freedom of the Spirit gives way to human presence and power, and the presence of corporate rulers and authorities.

What is more, loyalty to the institution has repeatedly depleted the church of expressions of the boundless love of Jesus. As Mumford notes:

*Systems cannot love, only people can love. They may profess or intend to love, but a system does not have the capacity to love because it is not a real person. The rationale of the system is to suppress and/or domesticate every dissenting voice. When unanimous support for the will and intention of the system is its single purpose, it has become corporate evil, the kind that has the ability to make us conform or rebel.*⁵²

Consequently, priority is given to protecting and defending the institution over the boundless, indiscriminate, unconditional love of Jesus, manifesting as grace, truth and justice. The more the institution takes priority, the less the Church looks like Jesus in this regard.

The structure and organisation of the institutional church highlights the divisions that have existed over the years, and in many ways still do. These divisions have often been very deep and very public. Consequently, instead of recognising that God has sent Jesus because of the oneness of the

⁵² Bob Mumford, *Dr Frankenstein and World Systems*. Wilkesboro, North Carolina: Morning Star, 2003, 15-16.

Church, lost people often look at the infighting, jealousy, strife and dishonour within the institutional church and say “why the hell would I want to be part of that?” (“hell” being the operative word).

The evidence is clear: the institutional church construct is a ruling authority under demonic influence. As such it inhibits the capacity of the Church to fill the world with the fullness of Jesus Christ.

How do we respond to this? It’s time to take up the weapons of our warfare.

Taking up the Weapons of our Warfare [6:13-20]

If Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities, triumphing over them on the cross,⁵³ why then do they pose a threat? The answer is that if we are submitted to Christ, remain in His love and avail ourselves of the armour and weapons of warfare that He has given us, we need not fear. We can then exercise the authority that Christ has given to us as believers, and we will see victory. However, if we don’t, then the rulers and authorities are a threat.

Paul encourages the Church to:

...put on the full armour 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. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests. (6:13-18a)

Volumes of material have been written concerning this passage of Scripture. There is so much excellent and comprehensive teaching on the analogy of each piece of armour and its significance in spiritual warfare. My intention is not to replicate this here, as you will find many helpful books in a good Christian bookstore. Instead, I will keep the focus specifically on the importance of this armour in our fight against the ruling authority of the institutional church, examining the offensive and defensive weapons. *It only takes one piece of armour to be missing to weaken the suit, and the more that is missing, the more vulnerable and unprotected we are.*

Again, Jesus is our example. When he chose to heal someone on the Sabbath⁵⁴, He was declaring war on the oppressive legalism that was inhibiting truth, righteousness, peace, salvation, and faith from being revealed. He confronted the Jewish leaders of the day with the Scriptures, when their

⁵³ Colossians 2:15

⁵⁴ Mark 3:1-6

complex system of laws was suppressing the grace and power of God. Judaism had moved from its original intent, and become a system that needed to be maintained, rather than a carrier of the revelation of Yahweh. Like the institutional church today, it had become a ruling authority.

Lifestyle: Our Most Effective Defensive Weapon.

I have often heard it taught that we should put on our armour in prayer each morning before we face the day. I would in no way discourage this, as I firmly believe there is great power in declaring the Word of God. So long as it doesn't end at the declaration – it needs to be **lived**. This armour is effective when it becomes part of our **lifestyle** in the world.

The first five mentioned pieces of armour are defensive weapons. The *belt* of truth, *breastplate* of righteousness, *shoes* for the gospel of peace, *shield* of faith, and *helmet* of salvation are all weapons that protect the soldier in battle. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul also refers to salvation as a helmet, but here likens putting on faith and love as putting on a breastplate.⁵⁵ Peter refers to our faith as a key offensive weapon against the attack of the devil.⁵⁶ I doubt if Paul intended this to be a conclusive list. I'm certain that he would see the living out of all of the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of believers as powerful offensive weapons against the enemy.⁵⁷

The point is this: for the believer seeking to join with other believers is filling the world with the fullness of Jesus, **our lifestyle in the world is far more important than our status or standing in the established church**. How unbelievers see us is far more important than what ministry we lead in the church, or how often we prophesy in worship. Do people within our orbit who are lost to God see us as people who stand and live for *truth* and *righteousness*? Are we known to be messengers of *good news* and *peace*, in word and action?⁵⁸ Do people see us as secure in our *salvation* – by grace we are saved through faith, not by works⁵⁹ - or do they see us finding our value and identity in work and busyness in the established church? Do people see our actions matching our words? Do they see us exercising *faith* in the face of struggle, or do they see us crumble under doubt?

In summary: if our value and kudos comes from our position and roles in the institutional church construct, it will consume us and we will lose the battle to be the fullness of Jesus in the world. As a ruling authority, the institutional church construct has an insatiable appetite for our time and energy. **However, if our priority is to grow in our capacity to represent the character, message and faith of Jesus to lost people, we are wearing armour that will protect us from the wiles of the devil through the ruling authority of the institutional church.**

The Offensive Weapons

⁵⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:8

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 5:8-9

⁵⁷ Galatians 5:22

⁵⁸ Paul no doubt was thinking of Isaiah 52:7 here.

⁵⁹ Ephesians 2:8

Paul then goes on to list two offensive weapons – the *Word of God* as the sword of the Spirit, and *prayer*.⁶⁰ Remember, these are weapons of warfare to attack rulers and authorities that would try to destroy us and the purposes of God through us. They are never to be used to attack people – believers or unbelievers. In this context I would also add that they should never be used to attack specific denominations, ministries or networks of churches. This only perpetuates the litany of division throughout the church’s history, and does nothing towards maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. How it must grieve the Father when he sees His holy Word being used by His children as a weapon to attack others of His children. How His heart must ache when He hears members of His Church “praying against” other parts of His very same Church!

Remember, people are not our enemies. Our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and authorities, powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.⁶¹ With this in mind, if we accept that the structure and organisation of the institutional church is a demonically influenced ruling authority, then it is this we attack with the Scriptures and prayer, not people or specific groups of people.

In his second letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul says:

*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*⁶²

In the context of Paul’s words here, Ed Silvano defines a spiritual stronghold as ***a mindset impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable, situations that we know are contrary to the will of God.***⁶³ While I believe that strongholds exist not only in the minds of people, but also in other physical and spiritual places, this is an excellent definition in the context of 2 Corinthians 10. It is also extremely relevant in the war against the ruling authority of the institutional church construct. I have little doubt that there are thousands of church leaders and possibly millions of church members who believe that the structure and organisation of the established church is contrary to God’s will. However, these godly men and women appear to accept the situation as unchangeable. Why do so many believers feel so powerless to see this situation changed? Could it be because the ruling authority of the institutional church does not want us to believe it can change? Has this ruling authority established a powerful stronghold in the minds of believers? How is it that many Christians believe that Jesus can heal the sick and raise the dead, but not demolish a man-made structure?

Surely it is time for believers to stand up and fight, declaring and applying the living and active Word, which is sharper than a double edged sword,⁶⁴ to attack these things that are contrary to the will of

⁶⁰ Prayer of course is also a defensive weapon. Some biblical scholars would not include prayer as part of the lists of weapons here. However, I believe there is enough biblical evidence here and elsewhere to conclude that prayer (and worship) is a powerful weapon of warfare.

⁶¹ Ephesians 6:12

⁶² 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

⁶³ Ed Silvano, *That None Should Perish*. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1994, 154

⁶⁴ Hebrews 4:12

God. The structure of the institutional church is not biblical. It is a church which carves up cities and regions into a bunch of competing tribes, each with distinctives that need to be defended. It is a church that is led by mostly godly and gifted people, but who are entrapped in “offices” created by humans, not leadership ministries appointed by Christ. **We will not see the church fully empowered to fill the world with the fullness of Jesus until the biblical leadership structure is in place.** This means apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers equipping people for ministry, according to the gifts that the Lord has given. It means bishops, elders and deacons being raised up according to their biblical definition, as opposed to the constructs of the institutional church.⁶⁵

Believers and groups of believers who are serious about fighting this ruling authority of the institutional church will need to courageously and persistently *be* the Church according to the Word of God. This will mean searching out apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip them. It will mean beginning to gather as believers for worship and equipping in cities and regions, without these gatherings being owned and controlled by any one part of the institutional church. It will mean giving priority to gathering with believers in neighbourhoods and workplaces, regardless of their denominational history, to fill those places with Jesus. It will mean determining to live more and more in the boundless love of Jesus, and in oneness with brothers and sisters in Christ. **In other words, we take the sword of the Spirit and fight this ruling authority of the institutional church by teaching *and* living out the expression of Church as revealed in the Word of God.**

And finally, we must never underestimate the power of prayer as a weapon to demolish these strongholds. I think we would all agree that the internet is both a curse and a blessing. It is a curse in the sense that it has allowed all manners of evil to be sent around the world with a touch of a button. It is a blessing in the sense that it has linked millions of intercessors throughout the globe simply by clicking ‘send.’ I have no doubt that we are beginning to see the deconstruction of the institutional church ruling authority, and the emergence of the Church that Jesus is building, through the growing, fervent and unified intercession throughout the world. **Now is the time to see a growing army of intercessors to persistently pray for a Church that looks more and more and more like Jesus.**

It's Time to Stand our Ground!

If you are a believer who has left the institutional church, then do not gloat. Be warned! History would tell us that you will face danger of falling prey to the subtle and insidious pull back into another form of organised religion that you tried to discard. You will need to stand your ground, ensuring your focus remains on the fullness of Jesus in the world. If you are a believer who is part of the institutional church, then do not despair. You have a great opportunity to be part of the new wineskin that is emerging. However, you will need to stand your ground, to ensure your focus, time, energy and spiritual passion is on seeing more of the fullness of Jesus, and not succumbing to the demands of the institutional church. In all of this, the challenge is to maintain relationships with family, friends and colleagues who belong to various expressions of the institutional church. When

⁶⁵ It will probably be necessary to find other titles, as these ones are so tainted.

we separate out, we ourselves have succumbed to the subtle temptations of the institutional church construct, and lose precious opportunities to grow in the oneness that Jesus prayed for.

One of my favourite worship songs is *Let Your Glory Fall*.⁶⁶ The entire song is a prayer:

*Father of creation, unfold your sovereign plan;
raise up a chosen generation, that will march through the land.
All of creation is longing for your unveiling of power;
would you release your anointing, O God let this be the hour!*

*Let your glory fall in this room, let it go forth from here to the nations;
let your fragrance rest in this place, as we gather to seek your face.*

*Ruler of the nations, the world has yet to see
the full release of your promise, the Church in victory.
Turn to us Lord and touch us; make us strong in your might;
overcome all our weaknesses, that we can stand up and fight!*

*Let your Kingdom come, let your will be done;
let us see on earth the glory of your Son!*

How true are the words of the second verse! We have yet to see the Church of Jesus Christ living and serving in victory. Church, it's time! It's time to stand up and fight against the powers of darkness that inhibit the capacity of the body of Christ to fill the world with the fullness of Jesus. It's time to confidently claim our calling to be a temple of living stones, remaining in Jesus' boundless love and sharing it with others; to demonstrate such unity of Spirit with fellow believers that it is like the oneness between the Father and the Son. It's time to be a Church that is strategically led and organised according to Jesus' plan, not the constructs of people. It's time to be a Spirit-filled body that looks so much like Jesus that the fragrant anointing of His love and power spills over into the world, filling it with His fullness. **It's time!**

⁶⁶ Words & music by David Ruis © 1992 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing, CCLI 209070