“We Wrestle Not Against Flesh and Blood”
By Dr. Rick Flanders

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

(Ephesians 6:12)

It was not that there were no “flesh-and-blood” enemies at Ephesus. During the great awakening in that city, Paul had faced the wrath of Demetrius the silversmith, who called together an assembly of idol-makers to protest his preaching (Acts 19:23-41). Later he gave Timothy a warning to beware of Alexander the coppersmith, “who did me much evil” in Ephesus (II Timothy 4:14). Jewish antagonists caused him “many tears” through the difficulties they brought on him there (Acts 20:18-19). And the very adversaries who had set themselves against Paul were also the troublesome opponents of the Ephesian Christians he was writing. Nevertheless the apostle, who at the time was actually in prison, said to them that their human persecutors were not the real enemy. What he tells them, God is saying to us. The real war is in the invisible world, and the real enemies are spirit beings.

That’s what the “principalities,” “powers,” “rulers of the darkness of this world” and “spiritual wickedness in high places” spoken of in Ephesians 6:12 actually are. They are the cohorts of the devil that were defeated by Christ in His resurrection and ascension, according to Ephesians 1:15-21. We understand from the Bible that the angels, both elect and fallen, are organized into combat units that are led by spirits with authority over them. The prophet Daniel got experience with some of these invisible authorities during his long periods of fasting and prayer. He talked with a good angel who had been aided in his battles with bad angels by Michael, “one of the chief princes.” Among the bad angels were “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” and “the prince of Grecia” (Look up and read Daniel 10). These were “principalities.”

The invisible world is real, apparently created about the same time that the visible world was (Colossians 1:16). And the things that happen in the invisible world of spirits, angels, and devils do affect what happens in the visible, material world. It is in the spiritual realm that spiritual wars must be fought, with spiritual weapons (See II Corinthians 10:1-6).

Unfortunately, we tend to fight our battles with human foes instead of the real enemy because, by definition, the visible world can be seen. Because we can see them, we wrestle with flesh-and-blood enemies and ignore our spirit antagonists, and bring on our own defeat. The fact is that when Christians divert their attention from the real war in the invisible world to the apparent conflict with human enemies, they lose the fight in both worlds.

Did you know that each of the great national revivals in American history was brought down by Christians turning their attention from spiritual concerns to some moral or political crusade? It is true. Although other factors also seem to have contributed to the demise of these powerful revivals, the element of wrestling with flesh and blood seems always to have been the main force against them. The Great
Awakening of the middle eighteenth century was cooled by the controversy with the Mother Country. The Second Great Awakening ended with the Abolition movement. The era of mass evangelism that began in the decade after the Civil War ended with Prohibition, and was actually killed through the enthusiasm of Christians over the Temperance or Anti-Saloon crusade. All of these moral/political causes had merit, and deserved the attention of believers, but the revivals declined as the focus of revived saints was diverted from evangelism, prayer meetings, church planting, and personal holiness, and redirected to political activism.

In recent years we saw it happen again. In the 1960s and 1970s the independent Baptists saw a real movement of God in their midst. Although everything about what they did was not perfect (the human side of any revival can be flawed), these fundamentalists really did seek God for His power and went out to win the multitudes to Christ. What resulted was the formation of many new churches, the salvation of many souls, and the phenomenal growth of many congregations. But when the election year of 1976 came, some Baptist fundamentalists became aware of the new political power they potentially could wield because of the great numbers that now attended their churches. The great evil in the land, in the minds of American Christians at that time, was the explosion of abortions caused by the Roe v. Wade decision at the Supreme Court in 1973. Soon pastors had they idea that the political climate could be changed by the new influx of born-again voters if they could be organized to fight against abortion. The problem was that, before the 1980 elections, although the Baptist and evangelical voting block was big, it was not big enough to vote pro-abortion politicians in significant numbers out of office. As a result of this situation, pro-life Catholics and even the Moonies were courted to join the fundamentalists in the crusade. The usual sensitivity of the fundamental Baptists to the issue of separation from false doctrine was somehow set aside for the abortion crusade.

And the new focus along with the new alliances did accomplish something big: the election of pro-life President Ronald Reagan. However, his election and re-election were about the only significant accomplishments of the Christian war against abortion. It certainly never overturned Roe v. Wade or banned abortions. After the 2008 election, the prospect of a pro-life majority on the Supreme Court was put farther away than ever before. The Christian involvement in the abortion crusade did have other major results, however. During the Reagan administration, Sunday school attendance plummeted by millions. The fundamentalist churches that were so large when they were aflame for evangelism have become much smaller, and some of the biggest have gone out of existence. The effect of wrestling with flesh and blood is always detrimental to the Cause of Christ. It always has been, and always will be.

This truth applies to more localized situations, too. Pastors and evangelists, as well as earnest Christians that are serving Christ as active church-members, often face the wrath and mistreatment of human, flesh-and-blood enemies. The Bible does not gloss over or ignore this fact. It says plainly that good servants of the Lord will have enemies in the world of men (See Psalm 23:5, Matthew 5:44, and Romans 12:20 to remind yourself of this). But they are not our real enemies. As a matter of fact, Paul was inspired by God to tell Timothy to think of his human adversaries as captives of his real enemy.
“And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.”

(II Timothy 2:24-26)

Those who hinder and hurt the man of God are not his real enemies. They are the prisoners of war his real enemy has snatched from under his protection. By meekness and by teaching the truth of the Word of God, he can hope to free them. But, of course, he won’t do this if he is angry with them, or wrestling with them. When the preacher turns his focus from the invisible world to his foes in the visible world, he will be defeated.

Ephesians 6 admonishes all of us to take up spiritual armor and arms, and get into the spiritual battle! Read again the classic passage on spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6:10-20. In 2010 the time is right for God’s soldiers to get back into the fight—the right fight. Of course, we must raise our voice for scriptural truth in the public debates of our day, and American Christians have a duty exercise their right to vote and run for office. But let our focus be on the war in the invisible world. As the passage says, let us gird our loins with truth, put on the breastplate of righteousness, wear the shoes of evangelism, and take the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. Let us use the sword of God’s Word as we give ourselves to prayer for the Cause of Christ worldwide. Let’s be filled with the Spirit and lead the charge for a new revival among believers, and another awakening among the lost. Let us not become distracted or (worse) carnal by wrestling with men. The battle is before us. May we shun the foolish trends of the day to minimize doctrine (truth), lower standards (righteousness), abandon evangelism, neglect faith, doubt the power of the Word, and give up on prayer. May we get back on the revival road, and see Satan put to flight in the conquering name of the Lord Jesus Christ!