

among the principalities in this society a ruthless, self-proliferating, all-consuming institutional process which assaults, dispirits, defeats, and destroys human life."⁴

"The whole armor of God"

So — the world is dangerous. We are in peril of our lives. This life of practicing resurrection is seriously threatened. Growing up in Christ is under attack. Who and where is the enemy? We find ourselves slog-ging through a quagmire of the devil's wiles, his hard-to-detect deceit. What do we do? The obvious responses fall into one of two categories: we sink into a quicksand of paranoia, live in panic, never sure of where the evil is coming from or how it will show itself, doing everything we can to keep the evil at a distance; or we join forces with demagogues, moralists, and defenders of purity, we vilify, mount crusades, define ourselves by what we are against, and live lives of negative spirituality. There are, of course, a great many who don't join up with either side but get along as best they can in a kind of flaccid complacency, inoffensive Laodicean lukewarmness.

But there is another way: to live neither on the defensive nor on the offensive, but to take our stand as Christians, acting and believing out of who we are in Christ, neither in panic before the enemy nor in a crusade against it. This is the way Paul lays out in Ephesians. We are called to realize and cultivate our unique identity as men and women living under the lordship of Christ in the household of God that is the church; we are witnesses to a unique and revealed way of life in the practice of resurrection — resurrection not as an abstract doctrine or "truth," not as a strategy or program, but as personally incarnate in Jesus and now in us.

Paul gives us a representative sampling of what this life consists of — six items: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and word

4. William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), p. 93.

of God. In contrast to "the wiles of the devil" none of these six items is a way to *do* anything. They do not add up to a plan or program. None of them can be done on our own, autonomously. They are gifts and can be maintained as gifts only in acts of giving. They can exist only by becoming incarnate in human beings with other human beings in acts of living — *being*. None is impersonal. We don't look up the meaning of these words in a dictionary. They are not spiritual skills that we perfect. We have a whole book of stories that give flesh-and-blood content to these six terms in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel and David, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Amos, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, Ezra and Nehemiah, Mary and Elizabeth, John the Baptist and Simeon, Peter and James and John, Paul and Barnabas. Putting them all together, we find the six words incarnate in Jesus, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), who gave "his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28 RSV).

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By linking each of these terms with an item of military ordinance, Paul reinforces our sense of danger. This is entirely biblical. The Revelation of John is our most comprehensive picture of the apocalyptic dimensions in which we are involved — in which *God* is involved! — in dealing with sin and evil: the enmity set between the serpent and the woman (Gen. 3:15), and the war that broke out in heaven (Rev. 12:7). The labeling of each of the six aspects of the practice of resurrection with an item of armor helps us realize that this life in Christ is not made up of passive qualities; rather, each one forms a field of participation in Christ's work of redemption. The words are not job descriptions from which we improvise a strategy and then implement the best we can. We are the weapons. *Who we are* takes precedence over what we do.

Jacques Ellul insists that this resurrection life must be lived in this world, but at the same time he insists that the Christian "must not act in exactly the same way as everyone else. He has a part to play in this world which no one else can possibly fulfill." This function is defined in three ways (I am abbreviating and paraphrasing Ellul):

1. You are the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13).
2. You are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).
3. I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16).

Salt of the earth is a precise reference to Leviticus 2:13, where we are told that salt is a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. What Jesus is saying, then, is that the Christian is a visible sign of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. So it is essential that Christians should really *be* this sign, allow this covenant to be seen by others. Otherwise, how will the others know where they and the world are going?

The light of the world eliminates darkness, separates life from death, gives meaning and direction to history. This is supplied by the presence of the church. The Christian is a witness to the salvation of which he or she is representative.

Like sheep in the midst of wolves. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But all Christians are treated like their Master. They are sheep not because their action or sacrifice has a purifying effect on the world. "In the world everyone wants to be a 'wolf,' and no one is called to play the part of a 'sheep.' Yet the world cannot live without this living witness of sacrifice. That is why Christians should be very careful not to be 'wolves' — that is, people who try to dominate others."⁵

Marva Dawn continues to carry on this prophetic penetration of contemporary American culture (including our church culture) in a torrent of lectures, sermons, and books. She is one of our most invaluable and discerning witnesses in exposing the "wiles of the devil." She is especially useful and timely in elaborating Ellul's interpretation of Jesus' "sheep," and then demonstrating what she names as "the tabernacled of God and a theology of weakness."⁶

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5. Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 8-11.

6. Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacled of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 35-71.

The six military metaphors in Ephesians 6:10-20 — belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword — sharpen the sense of danger, heighten the apocalyptic urgency involved in the battle between light and darkness, God and the Evil One. This is serious war, war in heaven. The hosts of Yahweh and every last "Christian soldier" are called into battle. The metaphors make sure that we never for a moment forget that it is a *battle*, requiring our full participation.

But Paul's metaphors at the same time make sure that we do not interpret them as exterior to us, something we can put on and take off, something we can do or not do. G. K. Chesterton accurately observed that Christians, in relation to all that is wrong around us, are either crustaceans or vertebrates. Crustaceans have their skeletons on the outside; vertebrates have their skeletons on the inside. Crustaceans are solid on the outside, soft on the inside. Vertebrates are soft and vulnerable on the outside, solid on the inside. It is not difficult to recognize which is the higher form of life, Christian crustacean or Christian vertebrate. The armor of God is the embodiment, the internalization of the life of the Trinity — truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, word of God — Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Armor is redefined in terms of who we are, not in what we do. And who are we? To start with, like the Lamb of God and the "sheep of his pasture" (which is us) we are non-domineering, non-combative. In the practice of resurrection the metaphors are totally de-militarized. The practice of resurrection is a thoroughly pacifist, but never passive, way of life. Violence, whether verbal or physical, is inadmissible. It is also, given the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 RSV), unthinkable. But far too many of us drag our feet for a long time on this. In a culture that romanticizes war and promotes it as a "crusade against evil," it is not easy to hear the clear word of God on this. Foot-dragging clearly is *not* standing against the "forces of evil."

The "armor of God" has nothing to do with killing or overcoming the opposition by force. If the weapons that we are given don't make us card-carrying pacifists, they at least post a severe prohibition against using combative language. With the armor of God internalized, we will not deepen our paranoia by either cowering in fear or demonizing

the opposition. The six “weapons” are not weapons in any exterior sense. The practice of resurrection is a thoroughly non-violent way of life, neither defensive nor combative. Jesus did not use the “wiles of the devil” to defeat the devil. Neither can we. Evil cannot be overcome by calling in the intimidating principalities and powers as allies.

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A major hurdle to get across before putting on the armor of God against “the wiles of the devil” — and having put it on, *keeping it on* — is that it often looks as if we are failing to gain ground, let alone post an outright victory. At the end of the day we look back and can’t see that the weapons of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God have made a particle of difference. If this keeps up for months or even years, we may lose patience and take up a weapon or two that does seem to make a difference. Propaganda, for instance, often gets results a lot quicker than truth or the word of God. Money makes things happen far more effectively than righteousness and salvation ever have. Technology is far more efficient in matters of communication and organization than patient love. Violence forces change right before our eyes while peace and praise and faith appear to be mere fantasy words born of wishful thinking.

At such times it is required that we re-enter God’s revelation in our Scriptures and in Jesus and read contemplatively, that is, in a patient, slow, *listening* way, to what is going on and has been going on since the beginning of creation.

It is particularly useful to listen in a fresh way to the witness of wise men and women who have unflinchingly spent their lives immersed in the seemingly intractable complexities and difficulties of working to give visibility to the presence of the kingdom of God in “this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12).

Martin Buber bears the witness of wisdom. All through the inexorable secularizing of Europe and the horrible atrocities of the Holocaust, he maintained a faithful witness that kept the hope of his Hebrew ancestors present and articulate throughout the twentieth

century and beyond: “True victories happen slowly and imperceptibly, but they have far-reaching effects. In the limelight, our faith that God is the Lord of history may sometimes appear ridiculous; but there is something secret in history that confirms our faith.”⁷

And Herbert Butterfield, professor of modern history at Cambridge University, carefully studied and wrote of the ways the Christian faith gave presence to God’s ways in our history. In the context of observing that the church has never been able to subdue the demons of violence and corruption and decadence in a head-on fight, he gives this blunt counsel: “Let us take the devil by the rear, and surprise him with a dose of those gentler virtues that will be poison to him. At least when the world is in extremities, the doctrine of love becomes the ultimate measure of our conduct.”⁸

On American soil, Dorothy Day spent her life generously providing food and shelter to the poor. The terrible poverty that ravaged our country in the Great Depression galvanized her into a life of advocacy for the down-and-out in New York City. Her life and writings spawned Hospitality Houses in cities all over the country. Her journalism — rooted in firsthand participation on the streets and ghettos and slums and reported in the weekly paper she founded, *The Catholic Worker* — maintained a nonviolent, compassionate, intelligent, and courageous Christian witness through the worst of times. She worked her entire life in poverty and obscurity, actively opposed by government and much of public opinion, but through it all maintained a stubbornly practiced resurrection life among “the least of these my brethren” (Matt. 25:40).

“Pray in the Spirit at all times”

The counsel to “put on the whole armor of God” and stand against the “forces of evil” is brought to a conclusion in a comprehensive admoni-

7. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970 [first published in 1923 as *Ich und Du*]), pp. 238-39.

8. Herbert Butterfield, *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 98.